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INFINITE STRATOS

YUMIZURU Izuru
Illustration: CHOCO

INFINITE STRATOS IS²

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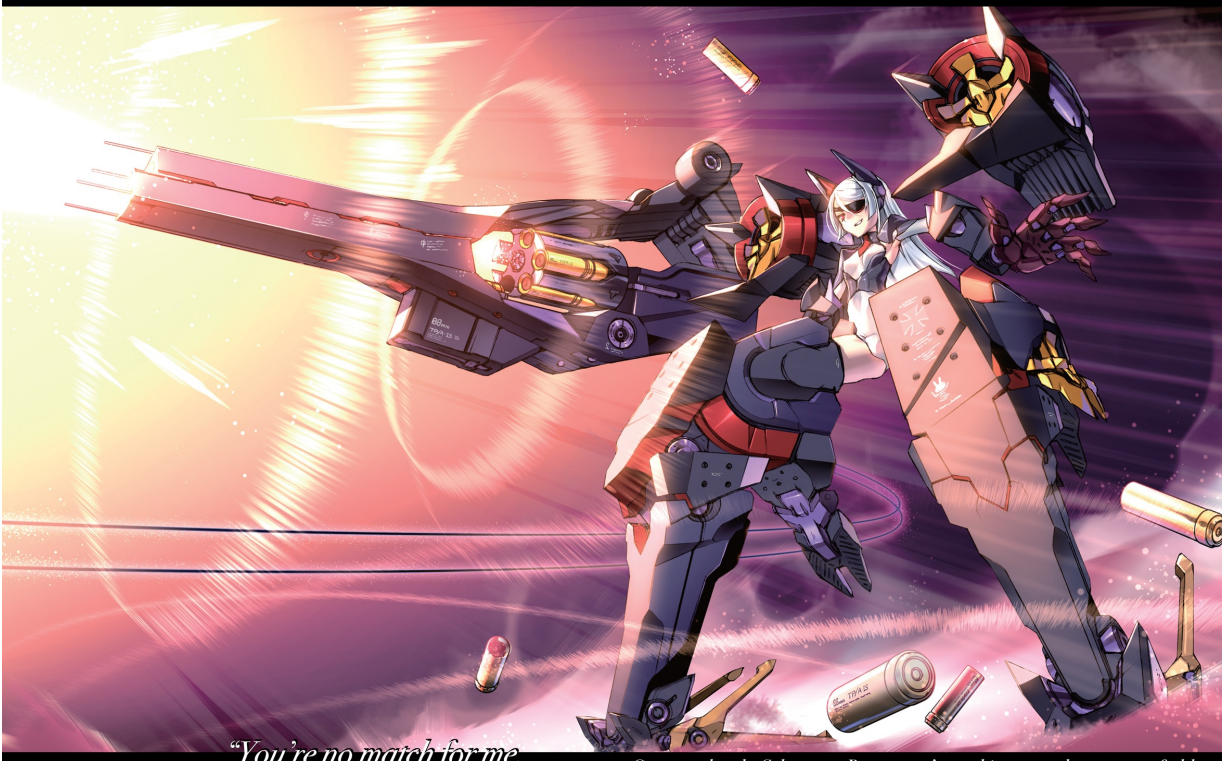




Cecilia: *"Ichika, if you'd like one, feel free."*

Houki: *"C-Come on, have some!"*

Rin: *"I guess I'll feed you. Open up!"*



"You're no match for me."

*Compared to the Schwarzer Regen, you're nothing more than cannon fodder.
Now, disappear."*

Rafale Revive Custom II

Designed as a major upgrade to both the offensive and defensive capabilities of the mobility-focused Custom I, this IS is equipped with an arm-mounted shield featuring an internal pile bunker. To fully utilize Charles' capabilities, it abandons versatility and instead mounts four high-output multi-wing thrusters and two smaller propulsion wings on its six waist-level thruster hardpoints.

Its expansion slots are optimized for synergy with Charles' Rapid Switch skill. This allows for in-combat weapons switching and reloads while continuing to fire, providing firepower far above that of the mass-produced Revive.

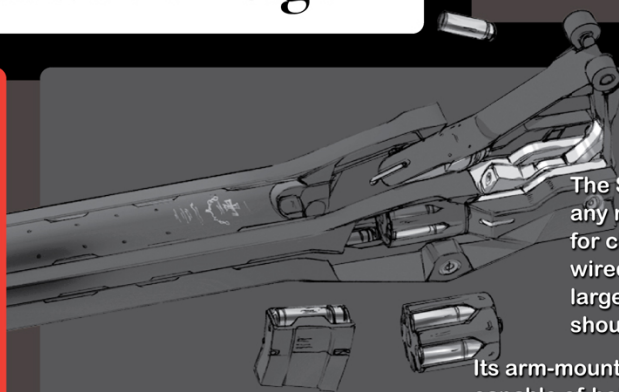


Japanese Name: "Shippuu" ("Gale")
Unit Code: RR-08/s2
Generation: Second
Country: France
Classification: Intermediate-Range Multi-role IS
Equipment: Physical Shield (mounted on arm)
Pile Bunker, "Gray Scale"
Assault Rifle, "Vento"
and more

Armor: Shock-Absorbent Third Grid Armor (Specially Lightened)

Main Concept: Increased Expansion Slots (with high-speed call), Multi-Weapon Rack

Schwarzer Regen



The German third-generation IS matches the latest in cutting-edge and evaluation hardware with precise engineering, but its highly-tuned controls are beyond the capabilities of the average pilot.

The Schwarzer Regen is equipped for combat at any range, with wrist-mounted plasma daggers for close-in fighting, shoulder and waist-mounted wired blades for intermediate distances, and a large-bore revolver cannon mounted on its right shoulder for attacks from afar.

Its arm-mounted AIC (Active Inertial Canceller) is capable of holding a target perfectly still by manifesting an inertia-nullifying energy field around it.

Revolver Cannon:

A long-range weapon which fires 88mm kinetic projectiles. At first glance, its design seems positively archaic, but in fact its complex firing process of combining a liquid propellant, super-heated nearly to plasma transition, and an internal railgun for further acceleration is only possible in an IS-mounted weapon. A set of metal pins fixes it to the legs of the IS, helping to absorb its heavy recoil.



Japanese Name: "Kuro Ame" ("Black Rain")
Unit Code: S-r.01
Generation: Third
Country: Germany
Classification: Intermediate-Range Assault IS
Equipment: 2x Plasma Daggers
Large-Caliber Revolver Cannon
4x Wire Blades

Armor: Lunametal Honeycomb Armor (Anti-Beam Coating)
Main Concept: Active Inertial Canceller



Cecilia Alcott Right



Left Huang Lingyin



Orimura Ichika

The only male in the world who can pilot an IS. His personal IS is “Byakushiki.”



Shinonono Houki

Ichika’s childhood friend—reunited with him after six years. Has no personal IS.



Cecilia Alcott

The British National Cadet.
Her personal IS is “Blue Tears.”



Huang Lingyin

The Chinese National Cadet.
Her personal IS is “Shenlong.”



Charles Dunois

The French National Cadet.
Her personal IS is “Rafale Revive Custom II.”



Laura Bodewig

The German National Cadet.
Her personal IS is “Schwarzer Regen.”

Chapter I *Boy Meets Boy*

Chapter II *My Roommate is a Blond Gentleman*

Chapter III *Blue Days/Red Switch*

Chapter IV *Find Out My Mind*

Epilogue *From a Deep-Red Doze*

Chapter I: Boy Meets Boy

A Sunday, early in June. For the first time in a long time, I was away from the IS Academy—which meant I was at the Gotandas’.

“And?”

“And what?”

Mmm. Dan Gotanda suddenly struck up a conversation during a round in a fighter.

—*Hey, wait! Don’t just fire off your super at the same time! That’s no fair!*

“I mean, it’s a girls’ school. You had to have gotten lucky, right?”

No way. How many times did I have to tell this guy before it sank in?

I’d met Dan on my first day of middle school, and somehow, he ended up in the same class as Rin and I all three years. So we ended up hanging out a lot together back then, but...

“C’mon, don’t hold out on me. I saw the picture you sent. Place looks like heaven on earth. Can’t you sneak me in, too?”

—*Not happening in a million years.*

My new school was the IS Academy, a special training academy administered by the national government. An Infinite Stratos, or IS, was a transforming exoskeleton originally developed for use in space, but now they formed the backbone of international militaries down here on Earth. The IS were developed by the big sister of my first childhood friend, the girl who was trying to hide something, but that’s a long story for another time. The thing was, the IS could supposedly only be piloted by women. And I was a guy.

So there I was, Orimura Ichika, apparently the only guy in the whole world who could pilot an IS, half-forced into enrollment at IS Academy. Needless to say, with the other students, teachers, and staff all being women, I was quite popular around the dorms.

“Well, you know. I’m glad Rin transferred in, I didn’t have anyone else to talk to.”

“Oh, yeah, Ling. She must be...”

Hm? What was with that half-grin, half-sneer on his face? What a weirdo.

“I win again!”

“Hey, wait! No fair! You shouldn’t get to kill me with chip damage in hyper mode!”

I should mention, the game Dan and I were playing was ‘Infinite Stratos: Versus.’ Everyone was playing it, it sold a million copies in its first month. It used data from the second ‘Mondo Grosso’ global IS tournament. Though, because of what had happened, my sister Chifuyu wasn’t included.

“Italy’s Tempesta is really good. The thing’s pretty much OP.”

“You should pick something else sometime. Maybe Britain’s Maelstrom, or something.”

“Nah, that thing’s way too clunky. Plus it does like no damage, and its combos never work right.”

The game was developed by a Japanese company, and of course, every country had the same complaint.

“There’s no way ours is that underpowered!”

The devs ended up having to release 21 separate localized versions, each with that country’s IS tuned to S tier. And they sold like crazy. Must be nice to be able to make 21 different versions just by tweaking a few numbers. Then again, there was an anecdote that they had to call off plans for world championships because they couldn’t come to an agreement on which version to use.

“Anyway, back to Ling—”

Dan’s attempt to drag the conversation back to Rin for

some reason failed as a new challenger appeared.

“Dan! I thought I told you lunch was ready! Let’s go ea—”

Dan’s sister, Ran Gotanda, was kicking down the door. She was a year younger, so in her third year of middle school. An honors student at a famous private school, she couldn’t be more different from her brother.

“Oh, hey, long time no see. I thought I’d drop by.”

“I-Ichika?!”

I guess girls really dressed down when they were at home. Her hair was held up to shoulder-length with just a clip. She was wearing a practical outfit of shorts and a tank top. But, you know, ever since I’d moved into the IS Academy dorms, I’d gotten used to girls in skimpy clothes or just not dressed up. They were all like that there. Their necklines had plunged as the temperature had risen, too. And since there were no other guys around, whether it was because they could get away with it or they just didn’t care, almost all of them didn’t wear bras.

C’mon, I was a healthy high school boy. Where was I even supposed to look? It was incredibly awkward every time I noticed a girl try to cover up when she noticed I was looking at her.



1. The first part of the document is a title page.

"Y-you came to visit? I had heard that you were at a boarding school."

"Well, sure, but I decided to head out today. I was around checking on the house, so I ended up stopping by."

"I see..."

For some reason, Ran was always really reserved and polite when she talked to me. It was weird.

"Ran, you need to learn to knock. You don't want him to think you have no manners—"

Ran's glare was almost audible. Dan shrunk like a certain plumber who'd taken a hit. As usual, it was easy to see the tier list in this family.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Wait, didn't I? I'm sorry," Dan chuckled nervously.

"....."

Her eyes were gleaming. Ran glared again at Dan, as if plunging a knife into a corpse, as she swiftly stepped back out of the room.

"Ichika, you're welcome to have some, too. Will you be joining us?"

"Oh, sure. I'll be there. Thanks."

"Oh, don't worry about it."

Click. The door closed, and silence settled.

I'd been thinking lately about pitching a sitcom called 'Dan & Ran.' Think it'd fit in on Sunday mornings? Yeah, I guess not.

"It's funny. I've known Ran for what, three years now? And she still hasn't really opened up to me."

"Huh?"

Just to change the topic for a minute, I was always amazed when I saw a guy give a girl some cutesy nickname. I could never do that, not even when it was a friend's little sister. So I just called her Ran. I still remembered her ambivalent but accepting "Well, I guess that's okay..."

"Well, I mean, look at how uptight she gets. She just nearly ran out of the room."

“.....”

Dan let out a sigh, then a huff.

“What...?”

“Oh, nothing, I just think you’re doing this on purpose sometimes.”

“Huh?”

“Ahh, never mind, it’s fine if you really don’t get it. I don’t need a little brother so close to my own age.”

Why was he talking about brothers? I didn’t get it.

“Whatever. Let’s eat and then go hang out in town, or something.”

“Sure, lunch sounds good. Thanks.”

“No big deal. It’s just going to be leftover lunch specials.”

—*Oh, it’s that sugary squash stew again?*

I didn’t really mind it, so that was okay. I was just grateful that they were feeding me. You should never forget to be thankful for farmers and cooks.

“Anyway, let’s go.”

We left Dan’s room and headed down to the first floor. We stepped out of the back door and made our way around to the restaurant entrance, at the front.

It was a bit inconvenient, but Dan had said that it “helps keep business out of their private lives.” I guess. The most important thing a house could do was satisfy the people who lived there. Though, wouldn’t that mean the renovations you always saw in TV shows just made the houses less livable? Anyway, enough of this resident satisfaction stuff.

“Ugh.”

“Mm?”

“.....”

I tried to peek around Dan and saw what had prompted the obvious, vocal disappointment. Another person seemed to already be at our table.

“What? Would you rather eat outside instead? That can be arranged.”

“Did you hear that, Ichika? Those dulcet tones? It’s

enough to drive me to tears.”

Ran was there at the table. I didn’t have a handkerchief to dry Dan’s tears. Which was fine, because I didn’t have any motivation to, either.

“Why not just eat together? Let’s just sit down. There are still other customers.”

“Yeah, silly. Just sit down.”

“Fine, fine.”

We sat in a row at the table: me, Dan, and then Ran.

—*Hmm?*

“Hey, Ran.”

“Y-Yes?”

“You changed clothes, didn’t you? Are you going out somewhere?”

“Ah, well, uh, yeah, but...”

There wasn’t a trace left of the messy girl from before. She’d let her hair down, and it hung full and lustrous. Her dress was a short-sleeved number in a light fabric, perfect for June. Peeking out from under the hemline were a pair of legs filled with the energy unique to teen girls. Her black knee socks with tiny frills were what people into that kind of thing were probably really into. Not, of course, that I’d know.

“Oh!”

Like a light bulb flickering on over my head, it struck me.

“Going on a date?”

Slam!

“Absolutely not!”

Wow, she pounded the table as she instantly denied it. I may have stepped on a landmine just now. This was the kind of thing that led people to say that the Japanese had no survival instinct. If this were a battlefield, I’d already be dead. All I could do was curse my own naiveté.

“Sorry.”

“Um... Anyway, it’s not a date.”

“It isn’t? As your brother, I was kind of hoping it was. I haven’t seen you get dressed up like this in mont—”

Thwap!

The ‘Sudden Iron Claw,’ also known as the ‘Silencer,’ if I recalled? It definitely took Dan’s breath away. What a terrifying move. Where did she even learn something like that? Did girls’ private schools include assassination techniques in their self-defense curriculum?

“.....!”

“Ghhhhhrgh!”

Our eyes drifted together again. Ran was like a cold and regal lunar queen, staring down at pitiful Dan, whose head nodded over and over as he begged for his sins to be forgiven. Still, I couldn’t help but think... “You two are always on the same page.”

“WHAA?!”

—*Oh, they’re perfectly in sync.*

Hey, ‘sync’ was short for ‘synchronized,’ right? Why not ‘nized’ instead? ‘Nized’ would work fine, too. Even ‘chronned’ would be okay.

“If you kids aren’t going to eat, it’s getting thrown out.”

“We’re eating! We’re eating!”

Gen Gotanda, over 80 but still healthy and full of energy as the owner of Gotanda’s and the head of his family, suddenly appeared. The sleeves of his chef’s jacket were rolled up to his shoulders, which exposed his muscular arms. Those brawny arms, which stirred two woks at a time, were a deep brown year-round from the heat. It was a tan hundred of times healthier than going to a parlor. And I knew well from experience that his fists were more than a match for even Chifuyu’s.

—*Okay, it’s time to shut up and eat.*

“Thanks for the meal.”

“Thanks for the meal.”

“Thanks for the meal...”

Me, Ran, and Dan answered in order.

“All right. Dig in!”

With a satisfied nod, Gen turned to the next order. It

seemed like he was grilling up, literally, Gotanda's specialty of 'Hellfire veggie stir-fry,' and the rat-a-tat-tat of a sharp cleaver echoed through the room.

We began our idle lunchtime chatter with a backdrop of sizzling vegetables. Of course, we were still cautious of our manners, as talking with our mouths full would be met with a flying wok.

"Anyway, Ichika. I heard you were able to meet back up with Ling and, uh, who was it, your first childhood friend?"

"Yeah, Houki."

"Houki? Who's that?"

"Just told you. My first childhood friend."

"So Ling was your second, then?"

"Well, uh..."

For some reason, the more we talked about Rin the harsher Ran's expression got. Their names were alike, maybe it was some weird kind of self-loathing? Wait, was that what self-loathing was supposed to mean?

"Anyway, yeah, we were stuck in the same room for a while, but now—"

Clatter!

"THE SAME ROOM?!"

Ran, visibly shaken, sprang to her feet. A beat later, her chair clattered to the floor behind her.

"What's wrong? Calm down."

"Yeah, calm down."

Another glare at Dan. Again, he shrunk back. Dan wasn't feeling very 'super' right now. Gen always went easy on Ran. If it were either of us knocking a chair over, that ladle would come flying before it hit the floor.

"S-Same room? You mean you're... cohabitating?"

What a fancy way to put it. Then again, Japan had always been a country which valued its traditions. From that perspective, Ran was simply being proper.

—That's enough of explanations I don't even understand myself, though.

"I guess you could put it that way. But that was only until last month. We're in different rooms now, of course."

The fried tofu was great today.

"So for a month and a half, you two were sleeping together—uh, in the same room?!"

"Pretty much."

Was that the sound of something snapping? No, I must be hearing things.

—*What's with you, Dan? Why are you dripping sweat? Did you uncover a new subplot?*

"Dan. We need to have a talk."

"Ichika and I were just about to go out..." Dan laughed limply.

"Later tonight, then," she cut him off sharply.

I mean, she was the class president at a finishing school. Maybe that was where she learned to be so piercing at times?

"Well... I've made up my mind then."

—*About what, exactly?*

"I'm applying to IS Academy next year."

Slam!

"What the hell are you—"

Clang!

The ladle struck Dan square in the face. His tipped-over chair rocked on the floor beside him, almost apologetically.

"What? You're applying? Why?! Ran, you're already going to a big-name school that'll take you all the way through college!"

However big its name was, it was one I'd already forgotten.

"It's okay. My grades are more than good enough."

"I really can't recommend IS Academy..."

Dan wobbled to his feet. His HP may be low, but his respawn timer was short. That was Dan's hidden talent, not that it was ever going to help him.

"I'm not like you, I'm not going to have any trouble on the

exam.”

“That’s not what I... Hey, Ichika! Isn’t there a practical exam too?”

“Oh, yeah. They get you in an IS and run a startup test. I think they fail you out if you’re not any good at it.”

You were also evaluated on a few simple maneuvers, and that was probably how they put together the initial ranking. My battle with my proctor (who I later found out was Ms. Yamada) was part of that, too.

“.....”

Silently, Ran produced a sheet of paper from her pocket. Dan took and opened it.

“Guh?!”

What on earth did you see in there? Guan Yu? Where are the gongs?

“IS Basic Aptitude Examination... Grade: A...”

“That little problem has already been taken care of.”

What an awesome-sounding line. I’d love to get to use it someday.

“The one that’s open to anyone? I’d heard the government was doing that as part of their efforts to recruit IS pilots.”

“Yes. It’s free.”

“Free is good. If you can get it free, take it,” Gen said, as he nodded.

—He really does go easy on Ran...

“Therefore...”

Clearing her throat, Ran sat lightly back down in her chair, now flipped back up.

“Ichika, if you could perhaps give me a hand with the coursework...”

“Of course. As long as you make it in.”

The idle assurance had no sooner left my lips than Ran latched on.

“Promise me? You’d better not be lying!”

“Sure.”

Feeling a little bit pressured by her enthusiasm, I nodded twice.

"C'mon, Ran! You can't just change where you're going to school on a whim! Right, Mom?"

"Well, I don't see anything wrong with it. Thanks for agreeing to help her out, Ichika."

"Of course."

Ren Gotanda, the self-described poster girl of Gotanda's. Her actual age was a secret. She said she stopped aging at 28. There was always a grin on her face. They say that a little bit of kindness always makes someone look better. Today, she was stunning.

"What do you mean 'of course'?"

For some reason, Dan was the only person getting worked up. What was he so worried about?

"Ugh, dad's not even here to ask! What about you, grandpa?"

"Ran's made her decision. It's not our place to argue with her about it."

"It's not that, just—"

"Is there some actual problem you have with it?"

"No..."

He really was a wimp. If I had something to say, I'd say it, even if it was to family. You may ask, "So you think you can handle your sister?" I thought of my only close family member...

—Okay, sorry, I'm going to have to take that one back.

"Then it's settled. That was delicious, thanks!"

Ran had finished her lunch without us noticing, and she set her chopsticks down and clasped her hands together while rising. Of course, she was clearing her place as well. Someday she would make a good wife. And whomever her husband ends up being would be very happy.

"Ichika."

Dan leaned in, his face close, and whispered for some reason.

"You need a girlfriend. Fast."

"Wha?!"

"Don't 'wha' me! Just hurry it up! This year, no, this month!"

What had gotten him so excited? Oh, did you know that cattle couldn't distinguish the color red? A bullfighter's red cape was to get the humans excited instead, or something.

"I'm not really looking for that kind of thing right now."

"What are you, some kind of dried-up old man? No wonder Ling—"

"Huh? What about Rin?"

"Oh, nothing. Anyway, my man, you really need to hook up. With someone. Anyone."

What was he after? How'd we even get onto this topic?

"Women are always all over you, too. Why is that? Are you trying to be some kind of heartthrob? Gimme a goddamn break!"

"What're you so mad about?"

"I am not mad!"

Oh, he was mad. Dan was definitely the kind of guy who'd insist he was sober when he was drunk. I guess, maybe. Not like he'd ever drank.

"Dan."

Oh, Ran was back. For some reason, it felt like the temperature in the room had suddenly dropped.

"Y-Y-Yeah? Wh-What's up?"

Dan was shaking. Was he cold?

Curious, I glance over to Ran. Our gazes met, just for a split-second, and in that moment I saw nothing but death in her eyes.

'Stay out of this!' her eyes screamed.

Never mind being able to take down anyone with the touch of a fingertip, it felt like she could do it with just a gaze.

"Anyway, I'll be going now."

Ran stormed out of the room, after having regained control of herself.

“.....”

Dan sat stock still, as if frozen in place. Well, it was warm out today. If I left him, he’d thaw eventually.

“Anyway, we can’t let lunch get cold.”

The stewed squash was too sweet, as usual, but the curry with chili peppers was delicious. How did they draw out the flavor like this? I’d have to ask sometime, I would love to let Chifuyu try it.

“Why’re... After...”

“Mm?”

“Why are all the girls after you, anyway? Is it your face? That heartthrob face? How about you keep the throb part and you let me have their hearts!”

— *What is he even going on about?*

“Quiet down, Dan!”

“Yes, grandpa. I’m sorry.”

Gen’s scolding had barely left his mouth before, in one swift motion, Dan was kneeling on his chair in a slight bow. He was definitely brought up well. Or maybe ‘trained’ was more like it? With the right training, even the King of the Jungle would jump through hoops of flame.

“Let’s go one-on-one later, Ichika.”

“Sure, I guess. What game?”

“Air hockey.”

Why would he pick something in which he’d lost to me the last 10 times? Was he trying to put his back up against the wall? Gotta hand it to him.

“I’ve gotten a lot better since middle school, Ichika!”

It was as if a dragon coiled before a curtain of flames, ready to take flight. My left hand curled into a trembling fist in anticipation of our bout.



“Ugh, my hands feel tired.”

The dragon was only an illusion. After today, I was up to 16 wins in a row. More than half of ‘my’ points were Dan’s own goals, too.

“.....”

It was after six. I was back at my dorm, lying in my bed. With my hands still shaking a little bit from the workout, I looked over at the other bed. Up until last week, Houki would have been there, but now she was in a separate room. It kind of felt like this room was too big for just one person.

“Hmm.”

—*Why’d Houki come out with that all of a sudden?*

I recalled the day she changed rooms. Just when I thought she was coming back, she made a sudden declaration and bolted like a rabbit, almost like the calm after a storm.

—*That tournament is this month, isn’t it?*

I checked the calendar on the wall.

The grade-separated tournament... Just as the name implied, they were individual tournaments held within each school year. It seemed like they would take a whole week. There was a plain and simple reason why it would take that long, though. Participation was mandatory.

Each grade had around 120 students. A tournament with that big of a bracket was a lot of work to put on. The first years hadn’t had much time to train so they’d mostly be rated on natural talent, while the second years would be scored on progress, and the third years on combat effectiveness. It was serious business for the third years, especially. Never mind scouts from IS-related industries, the crowd would also be full of international VIPs. The anxiety over just what sort of school I’d gotten myself into was beginning to overflow.

—*Anyway, I’ve gotta do my best. Can’t embarrass Chifuyu, can I?*

Last month’s class league match was canceled due to the attack, and a general gag order was issued. Cecilia, Rin, and

I, who'd fought directly, even had to sign paperwork. What was up with that? It wasn't something I could figure out, but I still couldn't stop thinking about it.

Idly, I lifted up the right hand that'd spent all afternoon gripping a paddle, and dangled it in front of my face. Pulling my sleeve back revealed a gauntlet that seemed to be attached directly to my skin. This was the IS Byakushiki's standby mode. You'd never believe that a mechanized weapon with such amazing power would have such an inoffensive-looking standby mode. Or maybe it was just sleeping? Was it conscious enough to 'sleep'?

It was the thing that told me, then, that I was fighting a drone. I was too caught up in the moment then, and to be fair it did cross my mind, but the more I looked back the more I thought that Byakushiki had confirmed it for me. I couldn't be exactly sure, but I was pretty confident. There was no sense in worrying about it.

—Ah, I may as well get dinner.

I hopped out of bed. The momentum carried me to my door, and I already had my hand on the knob when I heard a knock.

"You there, Ichika?"

"Yeah."

I open my door, and it pulled back with a click to reveal Rin.

"Don't just yank it open like that! You scared me!"

It was Huang Lingyin, my second childhood friend, and the sole pilot of the IS Kouryuu—I mean, Shenlong. She was always in my class growing up, until she returned to China two years ago. She was an energetic girl with twintails. Other than that, her breasts are ti—let's not think about that now. Lately, I'd noticed that when I started thinking about something, sometimes people could tell exactly what was going through my head.

"What are you staring at?"

"Oh, nothing in particular."

That was an honest answer, but for some reason I could still hear her mumble “Not that I mind...” Oh well.

“Anyway, I was just about to go to dinner. What did you need?”

“Huh, great timing. I was just about to ask if you wanted to go eat. If you see a stray dog in the rain, it’s only kind to bring it in, right?”

—*So I’m a dog now?*

“Thanks. Let’s hit up the cafeteria, then.”

“Yeah.”

I walked alongside Rin. It was a good time for dinner, and doors were opening up all around.

“.....”

With so many underdressed girls around, I never had anywhere safe to look. They were in shorts and tank tops, with nothing underneath. I kind of wish they’d pay a little more attention to where the opposite sex might be looking.

“Oh, It’s Orimura. Hey!”

“Eh?! Orimura?!”

A relaxed-looking girl was waving her hand at me. Her name was... Uh, let’s go with Miss Casual. No matter what time of day it was, when she was in the dorm she always wore baggy pajamas. When I thought of her, I always remembered her wobbling down the hall while she tried to work a hand down her too-long sleeve to push her huge nightcap back up.

“Hey, Orimu!”

“Am I stuck with that nickname?”

“You sure are. Anyway, come eat dinner with me and Kanarin!”

Miss Casual, who had to be nearly a foot shorter than me, had latched on as usual. Where did I recognize this from? Oh, right. It was like when a small dog wanted attention, so it would walk up to you on its hind legs.

“Sorry, Ichika’s already eating with me.”

“Oh, it’s Ling-Ling! Finally worked yourself up to it?”

“Stop calling me that!”

Rin’s voice trembled with repressed trauma, but Miss Casual was completely oblivious. Trying to make it sink in is like spitting into the wind. Actually, ever since elementary school, Rin had been teased about her name by the other boys in our class. Because she was Chinese, too, they always teased her with things like “Ling-Ling’s a panda’s name! Go eat some bamboo!” And I ended up getting the scolding of my life when I fought four of them.

“Calm down, Rin. Wouldn’t it be fun if we went as four?”

“I’m not sure about four, but... Okay.”

Hm? Was she just being superstitious? Wait, no, I had to be really sure I didn’t let that slip out of my mouth. She’d snap back with something like “Chinese aren’t all superstitious like that! Who the hell made up that stereotype, anyway?!” And once Rin was mad, it was almost impossible to calm her down. The class league match last month definitely proved that to me again.

“Where did, uh, Kanarin go, anyway?”

“Oh, wow. She must have taken off.”

The girl who, perhaps embarrassed at her skimpy outfit, had been covering herself with her arms had disappeared further down the hall.

“Hey, wait up!”

Miss Casual pattered off after her. Slowly.

“.....”

“What?”

“Popular with the girls, I see.”

“Huh? Why do you think that? It’s just because there are no other guys around.”

“Hmph. I guess.”

With a face more sour than her words called for, Rin strolled off toward the cafeteria.

—*Hey, wait! Hold up!*



"Did you hear?"

"I did!"

"Hear what?"

"About Orimura."

"Is this a good thing or a bad thing?"

"A really, really good thing."

"Tell me!"

"Calm down. You can't tell any boys about this, okay? This is just between us. I hear that at the grade-separated tournament—"

The cafeteria packed full of adolescent girls was as deafening as ever. Rin and I noticed a clump of a dozen or so at the back of the room.

"Huh. There's a pretty big crowd over at that table."

"Are they playing cards? Or maybe fortune telling."

Whatever it was, they were even more enthusiastic than usual, and a tumult soon arose. What was going on?

"Ehh?! Really?"

"Really!"

"No way! What are we gonna do?"

It seemed like it must have been something really interesting, as their high-pitched chatter washed over me like a tidal wave. Ah well, as long as they were enjoying themselves. "People don't age if they're smiling." I told myself every day that I was going to have to deal with real life soon enough, and for now I should just keep a grin on my face.

"Ichika."

"Yeah."

For dinner I was having herb-grilled chicken, stewed potatoes and vegetables, a savory omelet, and red miso soup with spinach. The bonito really helped bring out the flavor. Rin's dinner was mostly the same, but with a refreshing bowl of white miso soup. She paused while lifting it to her mouth, and spoke.

"You're thinking like an old man again, aren't you?"

— *Well, excuse me.*

"No, really, I can tell. You always squint your eyes when you do that. What's up? Feeling nostalgic about something?"

"Knock it off."

Why was she staring at me like that? Jeez.

"Don't point at people with your chopsticks. It's rude."

"I don't think it's that big of a deal."

"That isn't the problem. You need to fix your bad habits. Didn't Chifuyu used to get mad at you for that?"

"Ugh, just quit bothering me about it."

Rin had never quite been comfortable around my sister. A look of worry flitted over her face.

"Ichika, you're always such a—"

"Hm?"

"Oh... Nothing."

Hmm? Rin seemed like she was about to say something before holding it back. Whatever she'd choked back down, it slid down her throat alongside the rice.

"....."

"....."

The conversation had gotten awkward, and we turned back to our plates. Funnily enough, even if we weren't talking, just chewing our food didn't make the meal last very long.

"I'm going to go get some tea. Are you okay with green?"

"Sure. Thanks."

Even if she was getting some for herself too, the consideration felt good. On the other hand, she'd been a bit snippy, and it seemed like she was in a bad mood.

Did I offend her? I guess I needed to clear things up. I hacked through the dense jungle of my own mind in search of a topic.

— *Oh, I know, we can talk about the Gotandas.*

She'd probably like to catch up with the third member of our middle school trio.

"Look, it's Orimura!"

"No way! Where?!"

"Hey, let's ask him if the rumor—Oof!"

The group of girls from before had noticed me, and rolled forward like an avalanche. Anyway, what? What rumor? She caught herself, but I definitely just heard her mention one.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing at all!"

She tried to laugh it off.

"You idiot! I told you it was a secret!"

"Well, I mean, he would know."

One of the group stood as if to block me, and in her shadow two voices whispered back and forth.

"What rumor?"

"Oh, who knows?"

"You know how rumors are, wait 365 days and there'll be a new one."

—Isn't that a bit long? That's a whole year!

"C'mon, Miyo, get it right! It's supposed to be 49 days!"

That wasn't right either. But more importantly...

"Are you trying to hide something?"

"Us?"

"Hide something?"

"Of course not!"

They landed the combo and ducked back away. It couldn't have taken more than two seconds. I still wasn't quite sure what was going on, so all I could do was stand there slack-jawed.

"What are you getting yourself into now?"

Rin was back. In her hands were two drinks, from which warm steam rose invitingly.

"Why are you treating me like a troublemaker?"

"Wait, you think you aren't one?"

—Hmm...

"The tea's good."

"You're changing the subject."

How rude! What was she basing that on?

"Mmm, tea after a meal really calms you down."

"I... guess."

After letting dinner settle a little more, I brought up the Gotandas like I'd thought of. Surely Rin missed them, too. Really, we probably should have gone together today.

"By the way..."

I started talking about my day. At first Rin nodded along, but when the conversation turned to Ran her expression clouded.

"Wait... she's applying to IS Academy?"

"Seems like it."

"Mmhm."

For some reason, Rin didn't get along with Ran. Was it because their names were similar? Like, if I met someone named Itsuka, I don't know if I'd be able to get along with him.

"So, after she gets here, I'll be helping her out."

"Uhuh... Wait, what?!"

Rin pounded the table as she stood up. Why was she so angry?

"You need to stop making promises like that! What kind of idiot makes promises he'll never keep?!"

Wow, she seemed furious. Now that I thought of it, she was angry about promises last month, too.

"I mean, I guess you're right. Sorry, Rin."

"I don't want you to apologize, I just want you to follow thro—"

"Ah—"

"Ah."

"What do you mean— Ah..."

What a scene. The three 'Ah's... The first was me, the second was Houki, and the third was Rin.

"....."

Yes, Houki. That Houki. I'd run into her as she'd come for dinner. Judging by the time, she was trying to avoid me by coming late, but it looked like I'd hung out too long. Self-

consciously, she avoided making eye contact.

"H-Hey, Houki."

"Oh, you're here, Ichika?"

"....."

"....."

And we were out of things to say. It'd been like this last month when she changed rooms, when she was trying to hide something. At first, I tried to make conversation even as she avoided me, but getting nothing but blunt replies like 'yeah' and 'oh?' eventually wore me out.

"Wait, did something happen with you guys?"

"No! Nothing at all!"

Ugh. I wanted to casually blow it off, but Houki answered at the same time. Even I couldn't come up with a good way to play this down. But could anyone, really?

—No, wait, I think I have an idea. Hmm, this might be serious.

"Well, that makes it really obvious. Did you two plan that?"

"Of course we didn't."

I answered Rin's scornful glare with a quick excuse. Houki, her feelings seemingly hurt, turned her eyes and quickly walked away.

"Hey, wai—"

As I watched her swaying ponytail, I had a strange feeling, like something inside me was being pulled away, too. I wasn't even sure why.

"Anyway, I'm going to head back to my room."

"Huh? Oh, okay. Thanks for inviting me."

"C'mon, though. Why don't you ask me sometimes, too?"

"Hm?"

"Oh, nothing. See you around."

Rin, trailing her twintails behind her, walked off in the opposite direction from Houki. Maybe I should get something that would flutter like that. A cape, maybe? On second thought... That would be a bit much.

Setting out back toward my room, I gave no thought to what tomorrow held in store. Honestly, there was no way I could have expected it.



"Hazuki's really are the best."

"Really? I thought they were all show."

"But they look great."

"Murray's seem like like the most functional. Especially their smooth model."

"Oh, yeah, that one. It's nice, but it's a bit pricey."

It was Monday morning. The girls in my class were chattering loudly, passing around a catalog as they traded opinions.

"Where did you get your IS suit, Orimura? I've never seen that kind before."

"Oh, mine was a special order. There aren't any mens' suits, so they had to put it together in a lab somewhere. I heard it was based on Ingrid's straight arm model, though."

I remembered well. Recently, all the hard study had paid off. Good job. Anyway, IS suits were exactly what they were called: a special, body-fitting suit worn while your IS was materialized. While they weren't specifically required to pilot an IS, without one its reaction time slowed significantly. I didn't get why, though.

"IS suits sense the subtle electrical charges carried by the skin, and directly convey the pilot's movements to each part of the IS which can then maneuver as required. The suits are also designed with durability in mind, and they'll completely stop most small-caliber handgun rounds. Don't get the wrong idea, though. It won't protect you from the impact."

Ms. Yamada announced her arrival with a smooth explanation.

"You know everything, Yamster!"

"Well, I am a teacher. Wait... Did you just call me

Yamster?”

“Oh, I meant Yamapi!”

“Anyway, today is the first day you can order your own suits. So I had to be prepared, y’know? Err... Did you just say ‘Yamapi’?”

It had been around two months since my enrollment. Ms. Yamada had already had eight or so separate nicknames. If nothing else, it was proof that she’s well-liked. Personal magnetism counted for something, I guess.

“Um. You’re really not supposed to give your teachers nicknames,” she protested.

“Well, why not?”

“We wouldn’t have to if you weren’t so serious, Maayan.”

“Really, I’d rather you didn’t...”

“Oh? Would you prefer Mayamaya, then, Mayamaya?”

“Not really, just...”

“So then you’d like to change it back to Yamaya?”

“Just stop it, now!”

It was rare for Ms. Yamada to be so insistent. This wasn’t the first time that I’d noticed, but she seemed to have some issues with being called ‘Yamaya’ in particular.

“Anyway, back on topic. At least remember the ‘Ms.’ Understood? I know you guys can do this.”

The chorus of ‘yes, ma’am’ from the class belied the truth that Ms. Yamada would only acquire more nicknames as time went on.

“Good morning, class.”

“Good morning.”

In the blink of an eye, the lively classroom transformed into a strict drill formation. Well, not literally, just metaphorically. Our homeroom teacher, Ms. Orimura Chifuyu, had arrived.

Orimura Chifuyu... My older sister, and Japan’s former IS representative. Now, she was a teacher at IS Academy. She was as harsh on herself as she was on others. She stood like a soldier, sat like a samurai, and walked like a main battle

tank—and if she heard you say that, you’d more than likely be dead as a doornail. Well, more like “most likely.” Anyway, enough speculation.

—*Hm, she’s wearing the suit she had me get.*

While I was home yesterday, she’d thought to bring her summer suit out of the closet, and it looked like she had changed over already. It was still a black pencil skirt, so she didn’t look much different, but the lighter fabric makes it cooler to wear.

—*Ah, right. After the grade-separated tournament, we’ll all have change into our summer uniforms, too.*

“We’ll be conducting live-fire drills beginning today. The IS you’re using may be a trainer, but it’s still an IS. Stay on your toes. Do not forget your school-issued IS suit until your own arrives. If you do happen to forget yours, you will be asked to complete the drill in your school swimsuit. If you have neither, no one is going to care if you have to do it in your underwear.”

I was sure that “I do care!” would be the reaction of most of the girls here, not just mine. It would be bad enough being just in your underwear, even without a guy around. Oh, and by the way, IS Academy’s school swimsuits were old-school school swimsuits. The navy blue ones. They’ve been described as an endangered species, but surprisingly, they’ve somehow found sanctuary here. Dan would have loved it. On the other hand, I didn’t really care.

—*Actually, our gym uniforms are bloomers, too...*

That was another thing he’d love. And of course, I was just in gym shorts.

The school-issued IS suits were a simple design, form-fitting like a tank top and bike shorts. As for why there was a school-issued suit when we were all ordering our own? IS units were heavily customizable, so we were told it was important for each of us to develop our own style as soon as possible. Of course, not everyone was going to be issued a custom IS, so it was hard to call it necessary, but I suppose

they were also putting the emotions of these blooming maidens first. Who was it that said that women are slaves to fashion? Hmm. Probably Cecilia.

Oh, and one of the best parts of having your own personalized IS was that it also materialized a suit along with itself. It saved you the time of having to change. It seemed like when the personalization process occurred, the clothes you were wearing were broken down into elementary particles and stored in the IS' databanks. Honestly, I didn't remember much of the explanation, so let's not think about it that much right now. Just think of it as a glowing light, and then 'poof,' and I transformed. Yeah. That made it a lot simpler. However, any kind of direct form change, including of suit, consumed energy. So, outside of emergencies, it was better to put on a suit and materialize the IS normally.

"Now, Ms. Yamada, if you could take care of homeroom?"

"Of course."

Chifuyu passed the baton back to Ms. Yamada as soon as the important matters were taken care of. Caught unaware while cleaning her glasses, she placed them back on her face with a start like a surprised puppy.

"Well, er. Today we have not one, but two, new students to introduce!"

"Eh..."

"Ehhhhhhhh?!"

The room hummed with whispers as we awaited their sudden introduction. Of course it did. Teenage girls fed off rumors, and the three meals a day were just an afterthought. Never mind two, it was shocking that even one new student had escaped their notice.

—But why are they both in my class? Wouldn't you normally spread them around?

As I pondered that obvious question, the door opened.

"Pardon us."

"....."

The class fell silent as they saw the new students.

It was only natural, though. After all, one of them was a boy.

Chapter II: My Roommate is a Blond Gentleman

"I'm Charles Dunois. I come from France. Please bear with me as I adjust to life in Japan."

The first new student, Charles, introduced himself with a smile. The entire class, myself included, were shocked.

"Are... are you a boy?" someone asked quietly.

"Yes. I'd heard that there was someone here in the same situation, so of course I—"

A friendly-seeming face. Polite manners, and almost androgynous features. His hair was a honey blond, tied back behind his neck. His build was lithe, almost fragile, with slender legs. In short, the very picture of a young gentleman, especially his nonchalant grin.

"Squ—"

"Hm?"

"Squeeeeeeeeeeee!"

So that's what a sonic boom felt like. Seriously. The shrieks of joy propagated outward from the center of the class.

"A boy! Another boy!"

"And in our class!"

"He's so adorable! I just want to spoil him!"

"I'm so glad I was born on Earth!"

The thirst was real. It was probably only due to it being homeroom that no one from the other classes, or even the other years, came by to take a peek. Good work, teachers!

"Enough. Quiet!" Chifuyu barked, visibly annoyed.

It seemed like she was bothered by the girls' reaction even more than the disruption. Even when she was in

school, she didn't seem to get along with normal girls very well.

"Everyone, quiet down. We have another introduction to make!"

The other student, not so much forgotten as driven out of our minds, stood visibly apart. Her hair was a shimmering silver—almost pure white—and it hung down to her waist. While she was beautiful, it was obviously not from any excess of preening. She wore a patch over her left eye. Not a gauze one from the doctor's or anything, but an old-school black eyepatch. Like the one on the Oberst in that 20th century war movie. While her visible right eye was a flame red, it exuded anything but warmth. From head to toe, she seemed a soldier. While she was obviously shorter than Charles, the chill and sharp aura she exuded made them seem the same size. And while Charles may have been small for a boy, the other new student was short even compared to the other girls.

"....."

Standing with her lips sealed and her arms crossed, she glared at the class. However, this only lasted a moment before she fixed her gaze on a particular point... In Chifuyu's direction.

"Introduce yourself... Laura."

"Ma'am! Yes, ma'am."

The transfer student came at once to attention with a swift response, as the class' jaws dropped. Chifuyu's face twisted into a slightly different grimace as she received the foreign salute.

"Don't respond to me like that here. I am not your superior officer, and you're a civilian student. Refer to me as Ms. Orimura."

"Understood."

With that response, Laura returned her arm to her side, brought her heels together, and straightened her back.



She had to be either a soldier, or at least a civilian contractor. And her bearing toward Chifuyu was unmistakably German. I'd heard that Chifuyu had spent a year as a military trainer in Germany. It seems like after that and a gap year, she became an instructor at IS Academy. I say "it seems like" because I'd only heard it from Ms. Yamada and other teachers. She hadn't told me anything myself. I suppose there was a reason, but still...

—She could have at least told me where she was and what she was doing.

For whatever reason, the girl looked tense, or perhaps vulnerable.

"Bodewig. Laura Bodewig."

"....."

My classmates were silent. They waited for something more, but as soon as Laura's name left her lips they clamped shut like the shell of a clam.

"U-Um, is that all?"

"Affirmative."

Ms. Yamada attempted to prompt Laura with a smile, but received nothing but a harsh acknowledgement.

—Don't be mean to your teacher like that. Look at her, she looks like she's about to cry. Jeez.

Maybe it was because I thought that that I met her gaze.

"You! You must be—"

—Huh? What's with her? She's walking straight at me...

Smack!

"....."

"Huh?"

She suddenly slapped me. A full-force palm across the face.

"I can't believe it. I refuse to accept that you're her brother."

The pain from my cheek seeped through my confusion.

—Why? Why'd she hit me? What did I do to deserve this?

Now the entire class was staring. Even Houki was agape.

—Now's not the time to be thinking about her!

"What the hell are you doing?!"

"Hmph."

Laura left as abruptly as she had walked up to me. She strode to an open seat, she sat down, crossed her arms and closed her eye, before becoming perfectly still.

—Wow, she ignored me. Did she really ignore me? What's wrong with this girl? Is she some kind of alien from the planet Incommunicado? Do Germans slap each other when introduced as a sign of friendship? I never want to live there.

"Ah, ahem! Homeroom is over. Get changed and meet up at Field #2. We'll be conducting a joint mock combat exercise with Class B. Dismissed!"

Chifuyu clapped her hands to spur us from our seats. I was nearly beside myself with rage, but I couldn't make a scene right now. After all, if I stayed in the classroom much longer, I'd have to change with the girls. That would go badly. Very badly. I had to get out of there, and fast.

—Hmm, today the second arena's locker room is free...

"Orimura! You two are both boys. Show Dunois what to do."

Oh, right. Yeah, that made sense.

"You're Orimura? Pleased to meet you. I'm—"

"Honestly, let's get going and save it for later. The girls are already starting to change."

I explained as I took Charles' hand and led him from the classroom.

"Anyway, us guys are going to change in the second arena's locker room. You'll be doing this a lot, so try to pick it up quickly."

"O-Okay..."

For some reason, he seemed nervous all of a sudden. Was something wrong?

"Do you have to go to the bathroom?"

"Bathr— No, that's not the problem!"

"Oh, that's good."

We descended the stairs to the first floor. We couldn't slow down, or—

"There he is! There's the transfer student!"

"Orimura's with him, too!"

Yes. Homeroom was over. Advance scouts were arriving from every year and every class to get all the information they could. If we were caught up in that wave, we'd be so bogged down by their questions that we'd be late and have to stay after for "the special curriculum." Anything but that.

"There they are! Over there!"

"To arms! To arms!"

—*Wait. What am I doing in a samurai movie? Or are they trying to get the conch shell from me?*

"I don't mind Orimura's black hair, but a blond is fine, too."

"And those amethyst eyes!"

"Squeeeee! Look, look! Their hands! They're holding hands!"

"I'm so glad I was born in Japan! Thank you so much, Mom! For Mother's Day I'm going to have to get you something more than just picking wildflowers for you!"

Weren't you supposed to give her a present every year?

"What's going on? Why is everyone so excited?"

Charles, utterly blindsided, asked me with a confused look.

"It's because we're the only boys here."

"Huh...?"

Huh? Why did he seem so confused?

"What's so odd about it? Aren't we the only two guys who can pilot IS?"

"Ah! Yes, that's right. That makes sense."

"So yeah. The girls here almost never have any contact with boys, so when they do, they go full axolotl."

"Axo... Axo— What?!"

"An exotic pet from the 20th century. They were a fad in Japan."

“Hmmm.”

Anyway, whatever. Right now we needed to break through their lines.

[I shall not perish 'ere I reach my mark. E'en must I carve a trail of gore.]

“Honestly, I’m glad you’re here.”

“Why?”

“It’s pretty tough to be the only boy at school. It’s always weighing on my mind. Even just one more makes me feel a lot better.”

“Really?”

— *What do you mean, “Really?” Aren’t we in the same boat together? Come on, dude!*

Maybe foreign IS schools were attached to a coed gen-ed program? But I thought this was the only place in the world where you could get IS training. Interesting.

“Anyway, pleased to meet you. I’m Orimura Ichika. Call me Ichika.”

“Got it. Pleased to meet you, too, Ichika. You can call me Charles, too.”

“Got it, Charles.”

Somehow, we had managed to break out of the school building.

[Fortune smiles upon us. Onward to our destination!]

“All right, we made it!”

The door slid open as a gust escaped with a whoosh. We’d safely made it to the second arena locker room.

“Wow, it’s getting late! We need to hurry up and get changed.”

I glanced at the clock, and realized how much time had passed. IS suits were a pain to put on, so I was in a hurry. I had already undone my uniform’s buttons while I spoke. I went and sat on a bench, inhaled, and pulled off my T-shirt.

“Whaa—”

“Huh?”

Why was he surprised now?

"Did you leave something behind? Why aren't you changing? If you don't hurry up, you're going to be late. You probably weren't told, but our teacher is a real stickler for punctuality."

"Okay, I'll get changed. But, uh, could you look the other way?"

"Huh? I mean, it's not like I'm gonna be staring at you... Like you are at me, for example."

"I am not! Not at all!"

Charles raised his arms while looking toward the floor. Why was he acting like this? It made no sense.

"Whatever, just hurry up. Being late on your first day is no joke... At least, she isn't gonna be laughing."

Really, what I wanted from that flame-wreathed demon, teacher Orimura Chifuyu, was enough leeway to tell a joke. Can't we ever get on close enough terms that she'd blow one off with "Hahaha, you little scamp?" Nah, probably not. Honestly, Chifuyu was weird sometimes.

"....."

I felt a gaze upon me.

"Charles?"

"Y-Yes?!"

As I turned toward him, I saw Charles suddenly spin toward the wall, as he pulled up his zipper.

"Wow, you change really fast. How'd you do that?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Aren't you done yet?"

I had stripped off my pants and shorts completely, and pulled my IS suit up to around my waist. In flagrante—very flagrant—delicto, so to say.

"These're tough to put on naked. Things get caught."

"Th-Things?"

"Yeah."

"....."

Was I just imagining things, or did he suddenly blush? What a weirdo.

"There we go. Let's get going."

"Okay."

Having both changed, we left the locker room. As we walked to the field, I looked over at Charles again.

"That suit looks easy to wear. Who makes it?"

"Oh, this? It's a design by Dunois. It's based on the Phalanx, but it's almost all custom-order."

"Dunois? That name sounds familiar."

"Yeah. It's my family. My father is the president. I think we're the biggest IS-related company in France."

"Wow! So your dad's the company president? Makes sense, I guess."

"Er? Why?"

"I dunno, I just got the impression that you were brought up somewhere fancy. Guess I was right."

"Somewhere fancy, huh..."

Charles avoided eye contact, and a troubled expression sprang to his face. It seemed like I'd brought up something I shouldn't have.

"You're more impressive, to be honest. I can't believe you're the brother of *the* Orimura Chifuyu," he said.

"Hahaha, you little scamp!"

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing. Anyway, looks like we've each got one strike."

"Huh? I'm not really sure what you mean..."

There was some unavoidable circumstance here. Circumstance, circumstance, stump.

"Oh, never mind. We're better off not talking about it."

"Huh?"

Oh. He gave me a funny look. What a failure! I'd changed the topic to get away from funny looks. I felt like crawling into a hole and dying.

"Ahem... Mr. Dunois, a physics question."

"Why are you being so formal all of a sudden?"

“Bear with me. How do you calculate the drag force acting on a falling object?”

“Er, using the square of its velocity?”

“It’s like that.”

Good job, me. What an intelligent-sounding way to explain it. I had to have had at least 50 points in INT just then. I was sure of it.

“.....”

Eh? Huh? He clammed up. Why? Silence of the North? I loved that one, but maybe Charles preferred of the Lambs.

—*Hm? Wait. “Silence” wasn’t a series?*

He burst out laughing.

“Seriously? You’re so funny, Ichika.”

He laughed. What a failure! (Repeat from above.)

“I was hoping you’d laugh and give me a ‘Hahaha, you little scamp!’...”

“Don’t sulk like that! I already complimented your sense of humor!”

Huh? Really? Okay, then.

“You’re late!”

We arrive at the second field... A moment too late. The demon stood, her arms folded...

—*Did she want a beatstick? Really, when you write it out, it looks like a brand name for something. Beatstick, by Dr—*

“If you have time to stand around thinking of worthless things, you have time to get in line!”

Smack! Thanks for the advice.

Charles and I join the end of our class’ line.

“You sure took your time.”

As luck would have it, we were next to Cecilia. She had been trying to micromanage me since the class rep match in April. Sorry, but my “big sister” spot was filled already.

“Why did it take you so long to just get changed?”

Her IS suit was a standard women’s model, and looked something like a one-piece swimsuit, or a leotard. Apparently, showing so much skin made it easier to move

around. The IS' shield barrier provided enough defense for the suit to be fairly flimsy.

On the other hand, mine and Charles' were different—they completely covered our bodies up to our necks. Only the head, hands, and feet were left uncovered, almost like a scuba drysuit. Supposedly, this was to gather more data. Oh well, if ours were like swimsuits, too, they'd leave us shirtless. It seems like they thought of everything, probably.

"It was crowded getting here."

"Liar. You normally make it on time, too."

Huh? For some reason, Cecilia's words were laced with barbs. I suppose she proved the old saying 'that every rose has its thorns.' Somehow, I feel like I've said that before. Though then, it was in response to Rin's "Wow, doesn't it embarrass you to say that?"

"That's right. I'm sure it's because Ichika is just soooo popular with the girls. After all, if he wasn't, he wouldn't get slapped two months in a row."

Ugh. Such snark. Remembering that slap, my cheek began to ache again.

"What? Did you do something again?"

—*A formless voice... Are you a master ninja?! Guards! GUARDS!*

"Behind you, idiot!"

Oh, right. Class B was lined up behind us. Who was it? Rin? Had to be. No one else in Class B would say that to me. Always with the "idiot."

"Ichika here already got slapped by the new girl."

"Wow! Ichika, why are you such an idiot?"

"Don't worry... there are two idiots right here in front of me," said a voice.

Cecilia and Rin twisted their necks in the direction of the sudden creak of tin. A demon awaited their gaze. The demon of this training field welcomed all. She does not discriminate on the basis of age, nationality, and gender. And now, the gates of hell creaked open.

Smack!

Under the wide blue sky, the clipboard claims another set of victims.



“Beginning today, we’ll be conducting both hand-to-hand combat and marksmanship exercises.”

“Okay.”

With Class A and B together, there were twice as many students as usual. It made the response sound more energetic.

“Ugh... Hitting someone on the head on the least pretext...”

“It’s all, all, all Ichika’s fault...”

Cecilia and Rin rubbed their heads with tears in their eyes, perhaps from the pain of being hit.

—*Anyway, Rin, wasn’t that an improper and baseless claim? I may be overthinking things, but if I wasn’t there’s a slander case there for sure!*

Bam!

“I can tell exactly what you’re thinking.”

Ow, she kicked me. The girl behind me kicked me!

—*Teach! Teeeeeach! I need aid!*

“We’ll be conducting combat exercises today. Now, I know you girls are full of energy, so... Huang! Alcott!”

“Why me?” cried Cecilia.

They were completely caught up in it now. Give it up, Cecilia. You’re never going to be able to slide past Chifuyu. Of course, that didn’t stop her from doing it to us sometimes, though she preferred physical attacks.

“We’ll be starting immediately with those who have their own personal IS. Step forward.”

“Still, why me out of that list?”

“It’s Ichika’s fault that I have to do this...”

—*Lalala, I can’t quite hear.*

“Show some enthusiasm. Don’t you want to impress him?” Chifuyu whispered.

“I suppose this is a moment suited to I, Cecilia Alcott, the British National Cadet!”

“I guess we can show off the talent that earned us our own IS!”

—*Huh? What did Chifuyu just say to them?*

For some reason, their morale gauges are suddenly maxed out. What the heck. Did she tell them the winner got lunch? Wait, they’re girls, so maybe dessert instead.

“And who am I to compete with? I certainly wouldn’t object to it being Ling.”

“Well, well. I could say the same. This time, I’ll take you down.”

“Be quiet, you idiots. Your opponent will be—”

Shiiiiiiing!

Huh? What was that sound? It sounded as if the heavens were being ripped apart, but—

“Ahhhhhhh! Look out!”

Lookout? Who, me— Whoa!

Boom!

By the time I turned toward the voice, it was already too late. I was struck by an unidentified flying object, and rolled to the ground after being blown several meters away.

“Phew. I barely got Byakushiki out in time. But what was —”

Squish.

“Huh...?”

What was this feeling in the palm of my hand? Is the ground supposed to be this soft? Is it pudding here? Is this what they mean by the Pudding Belt?

“Er, Orimura, could you— Ahh!”

—*The pudding is talking!*

Wait, wait, wait. That made no sense... Fearfully, I turn my gaze toward my hand.

“Er... Um... We can’t... do that here... No! That’s not the

only problem! You and I are student and teacher! But... I suppose being Ms. Orimura's sister-in-law has its own appeal..."

Ms. Yamada. It was Ms. Yamada. Ms. Yamada was the pudding. And what a big cup of pudding it was.

—I sound like a dirty old man.

It hadn't been obvious because of how her clothes were cut, but now she was in an IS suit. Its low-cut neckline did nothing to conceal the beautiful curves of her swelling breasts. They were huge. Bigger than Chifuyu's. And even worse was my own position. Somehow, after being blown away, I had rolled to a stop on top of Ms. Yamada. And my hand was not only on her breast, but was still squeezing in shock.





I realized that I needed to let go. However, my body wasn't inclined to cooperate. No, really!

—Come on! Hand, you need to move right now! Why won't you move?! Is this what sleep paralysis is li—

“Wha—”

A sudden premonition of danger snapped me from my paralysis, and I immediately threw myself away from Ms. Yamada. A blast of laser light filled the space where my head had been a moment before.

“Ohohohoho. That's too bad, I seem to have missed.”

There was a smile on her face, but also an obviously-visible pulsing vein on her forehead. The Azure Sniper, Cecilia Alcott (Rage Mode)!

—Oh God...

“.....”

I heard the clang of something being pieced together. Was that what I thought it was? The sound of Rin's weapon, the Souten Gagetu, being combined? At first, it was split into two pieces. Combining them turned it into a double-bladed form that she could then throw. Yeah, she wound up just like that and then—

“WHOA!”

That thing almost took my head off! I barely managed to dodge, but stumbled and fell flat on my back. What I looked up at filled me with despair. Her twin blades, when combined, flew just like a boomerang. There was no way I could dodge.

—I'm done for...

“Fire!”

Bang! Bang!

Two swift shots echoed. The bullets found their mark on Rin's Souten Gagetu, and changed its trajectory.

As I listened to the sound of spent casings hitting the ground, I turned my gaze toward the shooter who had saved me. It was Ms. Yamada. Mounted firmly in her hands was the .51-caliber assault rifle called Red Bullet.

Manufactured by the American company, Klaus, its practicality and reliability have made it standard-issue worldwide. But what was most surprising was her accuracy, even having only managed to prop herself up slightly after falling. Unlike her usual puppylike air, now she had a steely calm. She seemed completely unlike the person who'd crashed into a wall during my entrance exam.

"....."

I wasn't the only one shocked, either. Cecilia, Rin, and the other girls were all stunned.

"I guess you really are a former National Cadet, Ms. Yamada. You made that shot without breaking a sweat."

"That was a long time ago. And I never was anything but a cadet."

Ms. Yamada returned to her normal self. She rolled over and stood up, then returned her gun to its shoulder-mounted container. Afterward, she adjusted her tilted glasses with both hands. Yep... That was definitely Ms. Yamada. She was even blushing slightly from Chifuyu's praise.

"Anyway, girls, that's enough gawking. Let's do this."

"What? Two-on-one?"

"Are you sure about this?"

"Don't worry. You two will lose quickly enough."

Being told they'd lose was enough to put some fighting spirit back in Cecilia and Rin's eyes. Especially for Cecilia, it seemed the prospect of a rematch was just continuing to pump her up.

"Then, let's begin!"

As the signal, Cecilia and Rin immediately leapt. Ms. Yamada watched for a moment, then followed.

"I won't hold back!" explained Cecilia.

"Last time I was just playing around!" shouted Rin.

"H-Here I come!"

The words were definitely Ms. Yamada's, but her demeanor was as cold and calculated as before. Cecilia and Rin made the first attack, but it was easily dodged.

“Now... Oh, right. Good timing. Dunois, tell us about Ms. Yamada’s IS.”

“Okay.”

As we watched the aerial battle unfold, Charles began an explanation in a clear voice.

“The IS Ms. Yamada is using is Dunois’ ‘Rafale Revive.’ While it was the final second-generation IS to be developed, its specs are comparable to those of early third-generation models, and it’s become known for its consistency, versatility, and wide variety of available loadouts. It currently holds a third-place share of the global IS market, even as the most recent model to enter mass production, and is produced under license in seven countries and used in twelve. Especially notable is its ease of piloting, making it both acceptable to a wide range of pilots and versatile in a multirole function. Its loadouts make it useful in close-in, sniping, and defensive roles, and it’s well-known for extensive third-party support.”

“Thank you, that’s enough for now... It’s over.”

I had been so engrossed in Charles’ explanation that I had completely forgotten about the battle going on. As I looked up again, I saw a shot of Ms. Yamada’s force Cecilia to dodge into Rin, which she then followed up with a grenade. From the smoke of the explosion, two figures fell to earth.

“Ugh... I can’t believe I, of all people, lost...”

“You got read like a book.”

“And you didn’t?! You’re not supposed to just fire your impact cannon in the air aimlessly!”

“I could say the same thing! Why’d you launch your bits so soon? And you run out of energy so fast!”

“Grrrrrr....”

“Grrrrrr....”

They were like oil and water... Or maybe they just didn’t get along. Really, neither was wrong so it was kind of embarrassing to watch. I could practically hear the whoosh as the reputation value of having our own IS fell. And

unfortunately, there was no circuit breaker. Their squabble continued until the girls of both classes were practically gasping with laughter.

"I believe we've established the competence of our instructors at IS academy, then. Be sure to show proper respect in the future."

With a clap of her hands, Chifuyu brought everyone back to attention.

"Orimura, Alcott, Dunois, Bodewig, and Huang. You each have your own IS. Split up into groups of eight, led by that list. Understood? Get to it."

As soon as Chifuyu finished speaking, Charles and I were buried under two classes of girls.

"Let's do our best, Orimura!"

"Show me how to do this!"

"I want to see how you pilot, Dunois!"

"Hey, hey, pick me for your group!"

They were as vibrantly enthusiastic as I'd expected, if not more so, and all Charles and I could do was stand there wondering what to do. Whether it was out of exasperation at their pace, or frustration with her own misjudgment, Chifuyu rubbed her forehead while growling in a low voice.

"These idiots... Group up, rotating groups one by one, in alphabetical order! Like I told you before. The next one to hold things up does 100 laps with an IS on her back."

Her voice cut through the confusion. The girls, who'd been swarming like ants until a moment before, suddenly skittered apart like spiders and groups were formed around each of us within two minutes flat.

"You idiots should've done that to begin with," Chifuyu said with a sigh.

The girls of each group continued speaking softly to each other, so as not to be overheard by her.

"Yay! I'm in the same group as Orimura! I'm glad I have my name..."

"Ugh, Cecilia? After she just lost like that? Sigh..."

“Let’s do this, Huang. Oh, hey, can I ask you something about Orimura later?”

“Dunois! If there’s anything you need explained, just ask! And by the way, I’m single!”

“.....”

The only group which was quiet was that of the German transfer student, Laura Bodewig.

Her tense manner. Her standoffish aura. Her cold, disdainful gaze. The mouth, which hadn’t opened even once since before. The other girls were just standing quietly, staring at the ground, seemingly unable to work up the nerve to strike up conversation with such an impervious fortress.

—*Honestly, I kinda feel sorry for them.*

“Listen up, everyone. For this exercise, each group will get to choose one trainer IS. We have three Uchiganes and two Revives. Discuss among yourselves which one your group would like. But remember, they’re first-come, first-served!”

Ms. Yamada was three times—no, five times—as serious as usual. Perhaps the mock battle before had brought back her confidence? Standing boldly and imposingly, if you took her glasses off, that would be all it took to give the impression of a woman who could get things done. But it wasn’t just her posture that was imposing. The swell of her ample bosom, larger than any of the students’, was on full display.

As is her habit from time to time, she adjusted her glasses. And as she did, her forearms rubbed against her dangling breasts, which shifted like melons on the vine.

“.....”

Scrunch!

“Oww! Hey, what was that for?”

Someone had suddenly stepped on my foot. With her heel, too. The aim of her stomp was almost exquisite, and was enough to make me let out an involuntary gasp of pain. Who would do this to me?

“What are you staring at? Let’s get on with training.”

“H-Houki...”

“What?”

Ugh, she seemed really mad. That wasn't good.

—*Wait, she's in my group? Then I need to use this chance to try to patch things up between us.*

With everything that had been going on, we hadn't really spoken in a week, and it seemed like it was just going to keep getting more awkward.

—*All right, just have to be friendly and...*

“Orimura, show me how to pilot an IS!”

“Wow, this IS is heavy! And to think I've never had to lift anything heavier than a pair of chopsticks.”

“Most combat training is done in pairs, right? Team up with me, Orimura!”

“Is it as nice as it seems to have your own IS? I'm jealous!”

I wanted to talk with Houki, but before I could I was surrounded by the other girls. And since I was the group leader, I couldn't just put them off until later, either.

“Well, uh...”

“Group leaders, help your groups get set up in the trainers. Everyone's going to be piloting today, so fitting and personalization are disabled. Let's try to have everyone at least started up before lunch.”

Ms. Yamada's voice came over the open channel. I'd managed to get at least a bit of a grasp on things as a result of my studies, so it wasn't just because I was the leader that I needed to help out.

“Anyway, let's set you up and get you walking, going in alphabetical order. First is—”

“Me! It's me!”

I received an extremely energetic response. You know, I knew it was you, you didn't need to wave your hand and hop up and down.

“Starting with A! Aikawa Kiyoka! I'm in the Handball club! My hobbies are watching sports and jogging!”

“Uh, okay. Why are you introducing your—”

“I hope we’ll get along together!”

She bent her waist in a deep bow, while extending her right hand. Huh? Did she want to shake hands?

“No fair!”

“I want to, too!”

“First impressions are so important!”

For some reason, the other girls had formed a line, bowing and with their hands out too.

“Um? I’m not quite sure what’s going on, but...”

“Let’s do our best!”

And soon after, I heard the same from behind me. As I turned to see what was happening, I saw Charles confronted with the same bow-and-shake routine.

“U-Um...”

It seemed he was confused by the situation. What a coincidence, so was I.

Wha-bam!

“Owwwww!”

The cries echoed in perfect harmony. It seemed that a line made it easy to discipline all at once. The girls of Charles’ group tilted their faces up, only now realizing the danger which lurked nearby.

“Good, good, nice to see everyone so enthusiastic. I think I’ll take over the training myself. Who’s first?”

“Well, uh, er...”

“Oh, we’re perfectly fine with Dunois.”

“We wouldn’t dream of wasting your time like that.”

“Oh, no, no, I insist. If you’ve got big hopes for the future, you need suitable training. Very well... Let’s go in alphabetical order.”

I heard a tiny gasp. I clasped my hands. See you on the other side.

The girls of my own group, having seen the carnage unfold before their eyes, had flowingly broken their line, and now Aikawa had opened the IS’ external console and was

checking its status. Oh, speaking of which, we had ended up with an Uchigane.

“Okay, let’s get started. Aikawa, how many times have you piloted an IS?”

“Well, uh... Just in class.”

“Should be good enough. Let’s get you strapped in and start it up. If we run out of time, we’ll be stuck here after school.”

“Ugh, that sounds terrible. I’ll take it seriously.”

—*So you weren’t taking things seriously before? Oh well, I’ll overlook that. Hate the sin, but love the sinner. Let sleeping dogs lie...*

Wait, where did those come from? Anyway, the first classmate’s setup, startup, and walking went without a hitch... Or so I had thought, but there was a bit of difficulty when the second went to strap in.

“I, um, I can’t reach the cockpit...”

“Er, uhh...”

Dammit. I’d completely forgotten about this, because I had my own IS, but when using trainers you absolutely had to crouch the IS before removing it. If you remove it while it was standing up, it stayed standing up.

“What’s wrong?”

There was Ms. Yamada. She’d already removed her IS, but was still wearing her bustline-revealing IS suit. Meaning, of course, that I had nowhere really to look but away.

“We, uh, forgot to crouch the IS...”

“Oh, the cockpit’s stuck up high? You’re going to have to lift her up, then.”

“Eh?”

“W-What?!”

“I’m so lucky!”

In order, that was me, Houki, and the second girl—whose name I’d unfortunately forgotten.

“It shouldn’t be difficult at all. Orimura, could you bring out Byakushiki?”

“Okay...”

As ordered, I materialized Byakushiki and mounted up. The month-plus of practice I’d done had paid off, and I was easily able to materialize Byakushiki at a moment’s notice.

“Now, pick up Kishizato.”

“What? Are you sure about—”

“W-Why does he have to do that?!”

Oh, Houki was lashing out. Perfect. Do your best. I was a healthy young boy. I didn’t want to be body-to-body with a girl I barely knew. Things would get real complicated real fast doing that.

“IS can fly, so they’re perfect for carrying someone up to the cockpit,” Ms. Yamada replied.

“Can’t she just stand on someone’s back?!”

See, Houki understood my predicament.

— *Wait, standing on someone’s back?*

“Stand on what now? And who’s going to do that?”

“Ichika, of course!”

Since when was that a given?

“Hey, wait. If I’m going to have to be stood on, I’d rather just carry her up. It’s safer.”

“That’s right. It’s safer.”

“I— Oh, do whatever!”

Well, I made her mad again, it seemed. Houki turned her back and stalked off.

“All right, Orimura. Pick her up and carry her.”

“Of course.”

I wasn’t very enthusiastic, but I had no choice. It was only once, so it should be fine.

“By the way, Orimura, you need to look at me when you talk to me. I’m not saying you need to stare into everyone’s eyes, but avoiding eye contact is considered rude. Try not to do it too often.”

“Oh, uh...”

“See, you’re doing it again! Look at me!”

Maybe because of her boosted self-confidence from

before, Ms. Yamada grasped my hand and pulled me around far more forcefully than I could ever have imagined her normally doing. And, since she did it with both hands, those massive breasts were squeezed between her arms more and more.

“Er, Ms. Yamada...”

Oh, no. I felt my face heat up. But it seemed like not even a third of my innocent emotions were getting through to her, as Ms. Yamada pulled me even closer.

“Look. At. Me! Orimura!”

The more force she put in, the more her arms pushed her breasts upward and toward me. For a healthy 15-year-old, there was no sweeter—and no more noxious—sight.

“Take it easy on him.”

“Yeah! It’s no fair pushing up your breasts like that.”

“My... My breasts?!”

Finally realizing what she was doing, Ms. Yamada looked back and forth between her breasts and my face. With a wordless shout, she leapt backward, wrapping her arms around her body as if to cover herself.

“U-Umm...”

I wanted to break the ice, somehow, but I had no idea what to say. “Nice rack,” maybe... No, I wasn’t that dumb. I’d be sued for sexual harassment.

“Orimura?”

Ms. Yamada turned her head to look back at me and opened her mouth. Her voice was trembling, and she was blushing.

“Were... Were you looking?”

“I, uh... Yes.”

I’d tried to avoid looking as much as possible, but I did for a little bit. I wanted to not tell a lie, but when she heard my words, even her ears turned bright red.

“Well, er, I understand that as a boy of your age it’s only natural, but you really shouldn’t do that because of our age difference and roles, but, er, I’m glad you noticed, but really

—”

“What are you doing, Ms. Yamada?”

Chifuyu held a palm to her brow, and spoke in an exhausted voice. Did she have a migraine? How painful.

“Ms. Orimura?! This was just, uh, I mean, em...”

“Just... You can explain later. Anyway, Bodewig’s group is running behind. Could you give them a hand?”

“Of course!”

Ms. Yamada rose and jogged off toward Laura’s group. Partway, just once, she turned back to look at us, and as our eyes met, I noticed she was still blushing.

“Anyway, uh...”

“Back to it, you idiots. Your group’s the next-slowest,” Chifuyu bellowed.

The demon was angered. Was it even my fault? Yeah, it probably was.

“All right, let’s hurry this up.”

“Hya—”

No sooner had I picked up Kishizato as I was told that she let out a yelp.

—*Wait, wait. I wasn’t even touching anywhere funny.*

“You’re so rough, Orimura.”

We were in a hurry here, weren’t we?

Girls really were light, though. Why were they so light? It felt great carrying them. Nothing like when I had to drag Gotanda around when he got knocked out. He was so heavy that I was almost tempted to just leave him. But I didn’t, I brought him all the way to the nurse’s office. Well, whatever.

“Hold on tight, or you’ll fall.”

“O-Okay...”

After making sure Kishizato, who reluctantly gripped my arms, was ready, I slowly rose. Not that it was a very big deal, it couldn’t have been much more than a meter. The thing with the IS was, though, that to strap yourself into a deployed one you had to lower yourself into it from the back, so even that height was somewhat dangerous. I carried

Kishizato up to the cockpit of the Uchigane, making sure that she didn't fall.

"Now lower yourself in. It's easier if you hold on to the armor there. Got it?"

"I'm okay now."

Since I was still holding her, it was a very close conversation. Her eyes were darting around nervously. Was it because she was uncomfortable being touched by a boy?

"Can I let go now?"

"Eh? Um..."

"Huh? Is something wrong?"

"It's not so much wrong as very right..."

"What?"

As we spoke, the voices of the rest of the group arose from around us.

"What are they doing?!"

"No fair! I want a turn too!"

"Why?! Why am I twelfth in alphabetical order! Curse the descendants of the ancestors who gave me this name!"

You should respect your ancestors, though. And won't your children be their descendants, too? Be careful who you pointed that at.

"I think I'll be fine, for now. You can go. Otherwise, I don't know what's going to happen..."

"Okay, got it."

I wasn't sure what was going on, but something was. Oh, that must have been it. That urban legend only girls knew. I wasn't entirely sure, but that may have been it.

"Yeah, now start it up."

I lead her through the startup sequence. The armor plating folded and locked around her, and with a faint sound the Uchigane rose.

"All right, next!"



—I can't stand this! What the hell is he doing? There's no reason to get close like that! All he needed to do was be a step!

Just the thought of it was driving me insane. Ugh! Couldn't he have even a shred of tact? Was that so much to ask?

—He's spent all day staring at Ms. Yamada, too. What a sleaze.

All this time, he was just ogling other girls. Yet, even when we lived together, he barely even acknowledged me! Maybe there was a reason why he was always quiet... Still, at the very least he could have said something...

"All right, now take off the IS," Ichika told the second girl. "Oh, wait, remember to kneel it. Otherwise—"

Before Ichika could even finished speaking, the second girl had removed the IS with it still standing. Meaning, of course, that the cockpit was stuck out of reach yet again.

"Wait! What are you—" he exclaimed.

"Wait, whoops, everyone was staring at me so hard that I just..."

"You just what?!"

"S-See?" she coughed.

The other girls, at least in our group, were glaring, as if she owed them something. Meanwhile, the girls of the other groups were staring, their mouths half-agape in envy. Like baby birds craning their necks to be fed. Sadly for them, though, there was no morsel from mother—only scolding from our teacher.

"Well, well. Plenty of time to stand and gawk while you're in an IS, I see. That means you've got plenty of time to do twenty laps. We sure are having fun today, huh?" grunted Chifuyu.

"Thank you, ma'am..."

—So many people are being so careless today. Don't let your guard down just because we're outside with everyone else.

"Jeez, I have to pick someone up again? Err, who was next?"

Ichika glanced around with a troubled look on his face. Now was my chance.

"Ahem. It's me."

"Oh, right."

With a look of surprise across Ichika's face, I stepped forward towards him.

"Well, uh..."

"What's the delay? Hurry and carry me up. It's not like I want this or anything, but it's the safest way. We really don't have any choice," I insisted.

"Then why don't you step on—"

"We already established that this is the safest way!"

"Okay, fine. If that's how it is, I'll carry you up."

—So this is the legendary "bridal carry." It's... It's amazing... No! A man and a woman shouldn't be this close! But it's for safety's sake. We don't really have a choice in the matter.

I choked back at my own thoughts.

"Huh? What's wrong, Houki? Are you coming down with a cold?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

—Easy does it. Just breathe and think calmly. We have no other choice. This is what we have to do...

"All right, here we go."

Ichika stretched his arms forward and embraced me around the waist.

"And... Up."

"Eek— Ahem! Ahem!"

—You idiot! Don't just grab me like that! I wasn't ready... And besides, you seem way too used to it...

I couldn't help but stare at his face. Suddenly he turned to face me, and our eyes locked.

"Is something wrong?"

"N-No! It's fine! Don't mind me."

I immediately looked away. I never noticed it before from afar, but Ichika really was strong. And now we were so close that I could feel heat radiating from him...

—*Wait! Does that mean he can feel the same with me—*

“Houki.”

“Now what?!”

“What do you mean, now what? Just hang on tight. Otherwise you’ll fall.”

“Umm... Oh, all right. Indeed, I don’t want to fall, so I guess I just have to hang on,” I said. “We have no choice.”

I slowly reached out and wrapped my arms around him.

—*It’s like we’re skin-to-skin... Wait, what am I thinking?!*

I shook my head to clear my mind, and as I did that, Ichika rose up into the air towards Uchigane’s cockpit.

“Houki.”

“What now?!”

“What do you mean, what now? I have to bring you up to the IS so we can get back to practice. Do you need me to bring you closer?”

“N-No! If you do, I think I’ll lose my—”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing! Anyway, this is fine.”

I hastily let go and started to make my way into the cockpit.

“Looks like you’ve got it. Anyway, after you start it up, just take a few steps and—”

“Ichika.”

“Huh? What?”

“Well, um. Did you have plans for lunch today?”

—*Why am I so nervous? I’m just asking him to lunch. It’s no big deal. We’ve had lunch plenty of times before...*

“Not really.”

“Oh?” I replied.

—*Focus! You can do this!*

“T-Then... Why don’t we have lunch together for once? Sounds like a good idea.”

“Huh? Sure, I guess.”

After his response, I began to walk with Uchigane. Slowly, but steadily.

—He actually agreed! But, we’re just having lunch. Lunch between two old friends. Nothing special here!

“No problems at all, huh. I knew you’d be good at this. Now, if you could kneel it and get—”

“.....”

—It’s been so long since I’ve had a normal conversation with Ichika... I need to make sure I don’t mess up this opportunity.

“Hey, wait! Why did you leave the IS while it was standing! Ugh, not this again...”

Ah. I didn’t mean to do that. Oh well, surely the next person would be content with that, still.

—I won’t make the same mistake as last time!



“That’s enough for this morning. This afternoon, we’ll be covering maintenance of the IS you used, so each group should assemble in the appropriate hangar. If you have your own, make sure that you also observe its maintenance. Dismissed!”

Having barely completed their startup tests, the combined class of A and B brought their IS to the hangars, then returned to the field. Time was tight, so we all were in a rush. Any slower, and who knows what the demon teacher’s response would be? As we stood gasping for breath, Chifuyu relayed her instructions, then left along with Ms. Yamada.

“Wow, I didn’t realize they’d be so heavy...”

The trainer IS were moved around on carts, but we weren’t so fortunate as to have them be motorized. These were man-powered. Literally, as I was doing the heavy lifting in my group. The girls must have been expecting a man to do the heavy labor. Even if they weren’t, men were on the

bottom of the totem pole these days. Times sure have changed.

It'd be really weird for me to make girls do it, so I guess it was fine. Meanwhile, in Charles's group, a team of athletic girls had insisted "We can't let you do that!" and took over moving the trainer IS themselves. Wait. How come they treated him completely different...

"Oh well. Charles, let's get changed. Remember, we have to go all the way to the arena locker rooms."

"Oh, I have to make a few tweaks to my IS. You can go on ahead, this may take a while."

"You sure? I don't mind waiting. I'm pretty used to—"

"Just go ahead! I do mind! Okay? Just meet me in the classroom."

"Uh, okay. got it."

He seemed insistent, so I just nodded. Why did he care so much, anyway? Whatever, I wasn't going to argue with him, so I gave up and headed to the locker room.

IS suits were almost perfectly sweat-absorbent. It was rather amazing. No matter how hard you worked out, you were left almost perfectly dry. I guess it was because they were originally developed for use in space? That made sense to me, at least.

Quickly, I finished changing. IS suits were three times easier to take off than put on. I left the locker room as I dried my head with a towel.



"Why on earth..."

"Hm?"

For lunch, we had gone to the roof. Normal high schools tried their hardest to keep students from the roof, but IS Academy was different. Seasonal flowers bloomed from beautifully-arranged beds, placed on the sort of calming cobblestone floor reminiscent of a European chateau.

Scattered about were round tables with chairs, enlivened by the chatter of the girls on sunny days. Today, everyone had gone to the cafeteria hoping to find Charles, so only we were up here. Yay, privacy. Privacy, yay.

“The weather’s good, so it’s nice to eat on the roof, right?”

“That’s not what I meant...”

Houki cast a quick gaze to the side. There sat Cecilia, Rin, and Charles.

“It’s more fun to eat in a group anyway. Plus, Charles just transferred here, so he doesn’t know his way around yet.”

“I guess...”

Houki raised a clenched hand, as if she was about to object. From it, though, dangled a home-cooked lunch.

Since everyone at IS Academy lived in the dorms, the kitchens were made available in the mornings to students who’d like to prep their own lunch. I’d poked my head in once out of curiosity, and could still remember my befuddlement at the commercial equipment inside. Schools directly run by the national government really had loads of money to burn.

And so it seemed that Houki had made her own lunch today. With enough to share with me, even. Childhood friends were great.

“Here, Ichika. There’s enough for you.”

Rin slung a container at me. Don’t throw food like that, Rin!

“Oh! Sweet-and-sour pork!”

“Yeah. I made some this morning. You said you wanted to try it, right?”

Childhood friends truly were God’s gift to mankind. But who would ever think to have sweet-and-sour pork without rice? Rin had brought rice, but only enough for herself. She tended to take things a little too literally at times.

“Ahem. Ichika... By some twist of fate, I happened to awaken early this morning, and decided to prepare these. If you’d like one, feel free.”

Cecilia opened a basket. Inside were a neat line of sandwiches. But...

"Uh, sure. Thanks."

My response was a beat delayed. Rin looked on with an almost shocked expression. Dammit, Rin, at least you didn't have to actually eat it.

"Hm? Is something wrong?"

"O-Oh! It's nothing!"

To be honest... The British National Cadet, Cecilia Alcott, was absolutely terrible at cooking. Everything she made was beautiful, but it came out tasting awful. I'd sometimes contemplated seriously asking her why she tried to cook things she had no idea how to make, but I had no inclination to do so just then. I didn't think it would end well. But really, why did she?

She was the rich young scion of a noble family, so surely she had more than one personal chef, had never picked up a cleaver, and rarely even chose her own meal from a menu. When asked about it, she simply said "Well, I made them like in the book."

—*Uh, Cecilia, I think you mean more "like the picture," not "like the book."*

The taste probably would be a lot better if she actually went by the book, instead.

"Are you gonna drag it out rather than being honest? Idiot."

Don't talk to me like that, Rin. I had done the same for her when she cooked me near-poison. The words "Tell me it's delicious or I'll kill you" were written all over your face. But even then, it was obviously something that she'd worked hard on making herself. I wanted to avoid saying it was bad if I could. I was grateful just for the thought. Extremely grateful. Up until coming to IS Academy, I'd always done the cooking. I wish Chifuyu was this grateful to me. Then again, if I kept lying nothing would ever change... Sigh.

"Are you sure it was okay for me to sit with you?" Charles

said from beside me.

Again, he was being so incredibly polite that he was almost causing more trouble. To be honest, girls had gathered in droves at the doors of Class 1-A to do battle over a second boy, yet the young blond gentleman had managed to disperse them with both courtesy and respect. Perhaps they only left because pressing him any further would have become embarrassing; and so, they drifted away with an expression of frustrated joy on their faces.

His words to send them off were: "It is not the place of one such as I to pluck such beautiful flowers. Even their sweet scent is nearly enough to intoxicate me." It was incredible. Amazing, even. He seemed completely unsarcastic, too. His earnestness, and more than anything, his profundity and lyricism, only made his words sound more bright. His gentleness, even more so. The third year whose hand he grasped actually fainted.

Anyway, since he'd managed to clear away the entourage, I invited him. Then Rin and Cecilia ended up tagging along, too. I had no reason to turn them down, and it seemed like we'd all get along better with more people there. Since we're all National Cadets, I was sure we'd have plenty to talk about. Though, strictly speaking, it seemed like I wasn't officially a National Cadet. As a male, whether I was subject to the Alaska Treaty or not appeared to be a matter of much international debate. I wasn't particularly concerned either way, but I was certainly glad to have my own IS. I'd once helped Houki to request a trainer, and the amount of paperwork to fill out left me speechless. Ten sheets or so of composition paper? What could possibly take that much writing?

"Plus, we guys need to get along. It's not always the most convenient, but let's help each other out. If there's anything you need to know, just ask me. Well... Except about IS."

"You need to study harder."

"I am studying hard, there's just too much to remember."

You guys only know everything since you started before you even enrolled here.”

“Well, yeah. It depends on when you take the aptitude test, but the latest you’d be starting special classes is in junior high.”

That certainly seemed to be the case. As for Rin herself, she’d been studying as a National Cadet with her own IS since her third year of middle school, so I couldn’t even imagine how much hard work she’d put in. Currently, in terms of mock battle win rate, our ranks were Rin first, Cecilia second, Houki third, and myself fourth. Not very flattering results, admittedly.

“Thanks. You’re so nice,” said Charles.

Da-dum.

That guileless smile and those words were enough to set me off, though he was a guy.

“Well, I mean, we’re probably going to be roommates soon enough, so...” I replied.

“Oh, Ichika, has my room been assigned yet?”

“Not technically, but it’s gotta be mine. After all, you’re a guy, too.”

“Oh. Right, that makes sense.”

The conversation continued as we ate. Rin and I had our sweet-and-sour pork, while Charles had a roll he’d bought. Cecilia had brought food as well, with the sandwiches I’d been offered “one” of earlier pushed off entirely on me.

“.....”

The whole time, beside me, Houki sat silently, chopsticks unmoving—having not even opened her lunch box.

“What’s wrong? Do you have a stomachache?”

“No...”

“Oh. By the way, Houki, if you could be so kind as to pass me my share...”

“.....”

She silently passed the lunch box, and I racked my mind for something to say. It seemed like being in the same group

hadn't actually improved things between us any. Was she mad about something?

"Then, if I may... Oh, wow!"

Opening the box, I found a well-balanced menu of salt-grilled salmon, fried chicken, konnyaku and burdock stir-fried with hot peppers, and spinach salad with sesame dressing.

"This looks amazing! You must have worked so hard on each of them."

"I-It's no big deal. I just happen to have had some left over."

"I'm still grateful. Thanks, Houki."

"H-Hmph."

Even as she tried to downplay it, Houki couldn't hide her smile as she opened her own lunch box. Of course, her menu was the same as mi— Wait, what?

"Why don't you have any fried chicken, Houki?"

"Well... Umm..."

For some reason, she avoided eye contact. Why was she doing this now? Should I not have asked her that?

"They came out good, but I just couldn't."

"Huh?"

"I'm on a diet! So I made one less thing for myself. Is that a problem?"

"No. But you don't look fat or anything."

I didn't realize at the time how dangerous that statement could be. Rin and Cecilia's eyes began to glow red, and they jumped to the attack.

"Why do men always assume that someone is fat just because they're on a diet?!"

"I simply cannot believe that you'd be so indelicate."

"No, really, she looks like she doesn't need a diet at—"

I looked to my side, at Houki. I swear, I didn't do anything else, yet she still pushed my face back aside.

"Where were you just looking?!"

"Uh? Your body?"

Obviously I wasn't looking at her face— Ow!

"What are you doing staring at her breasts?!"

Rin stomped her heel down on my foot with full force. She then proceeded to grind it four more times. That really hurts. Please stop. How nimble she was, to be able to do that around a table...

"It seems there are many ways in which Ichika fails to be a gentleman," Cecilia chimed in.

Of course, her face was smiling even as the veins on her forehead throbbed.

—Cecilia has all the patience of a saint, provided you mean a warrior saint like Joan of Arc. Though... that's a strange choice, given that she's English.

"ICHIKA!"

Angry childhood friends echoed in stereo. How could they tell that I was thinking of a joke? Why would that even make them mad? I really didn't understand the female persuasion at all.

"Huh?"

Charles didn't quite understand what was going on, and watched with a slightly confused look. Maybe Cecilia got swapped with Charles?

"What's wrong, Ichika? You're making such a strange face," commented Charles.

"Strange? How so?"

"There's something about your mouth... You look like an old man watching his married grandchildren get together."

"Not like a wise-aged academic who loves history almost as much as he loves coffee?"

"Ahahah. That's so silly, Ichika. I love it."

Shot down with a smile. This was the first time I experienced that angelic cruelty.

"Ahem. That's enough nonsense. Let's have lunch. Our break isn't long enough to chatter up here all day."

Houki spoke the harsh truth. Hey, wait. What did she mean by "nonsense?"

"Anyway, let's eat."

I immediately stuffed my mouth with chicken.

"Wow, this is good!"

The time spent waiting in a lunch box had left it cold, but even so, Houki's fried chicken was excellent. The breading was still crisp, not soggy at all. The juices, which filled my mouth as I bit down, were thick and rich, as if she expected it to be served cold. Yet somehow, it was refreshingly clean and without an aftertaste, and as soon as I swallowed I was ready for another bite.

"This must have taken you a while to make. Hmm, what's in it? Ginger and soy... What else? I know I've had something like it before."

"Grated garlic. That, and a little bit of black pepper at the beginning. And as my secret touch, a pinch of grated daikon."

"Wow! That sounds good. I'll have to give it a try myself, sometime."

I was surprised at how tasty it was. I couldn't believe this was the same person who had made utterly flavorless fried rice the month before. Then again. You know. Women took to cooking and cleaning like nothing else. Meanwhile, it took forever for a guy to learn. It was like women were specced out differently from the factory. I was a bit jealous, and a bit resentful. When I first started cooking, I was terrible at it. Then again, Chifuyu finished every bite even if she grumbled, and that kind of ended up being my motivation to get to the point where I am now.

"Really, though, this is good. Are you sure you don't want any, Houki?"

"I... ate all the ones that didn't come out right..."

"Hm?"

"Oh, uh, nothing! It's just, umm... I'm glad they're good," she mumbled.

For some reason, Houki had been speaking in a low voice that I couldn't always pick up. Maybe she didn't want me to

hear?

"Really, it's good. You should try some. Here."

As I spoke, I picked up a piece that would be bite-sized for a girl with my chopsticks. Of course, I cupped it with my left hand to make sure it wouldn't fall.

"W-What?!"

"C'mon. Try a piece."

"No, I-I, wait, uh..."

For some reason, Houki awkwardly stuttered. Was I imagining things, or were her cheeks bright red?

"....."

Where did her usual razor sharpness go? Houki was just looking back and forth between her lunch box and my chopsticks, flustered.

"....."

"....."

I could feel stares coming from the other side of Houki. They were from Rin and Cecilia.

— *Why are they glaring at me like that... Oh! They must have want some chicken too, huh?*

"I'm just going to point out that you have the wrong idea."

"How rude. A proper lady would never do such a thing." Or not. Whatever.

"C'mon. Have some, Houki."

"No, I— Well... Umm..." Houki cleared her throat.

A strange expression flitted over her face before she knit her brow into a frown. What was going on in her head?

"Oh, is this the thing Japanese couples do where they say 'ahhh'? I didn't realize you two were that close."

Charles grinned with obvious self-satisfaction as he spoke. The smile of a true golden boy. Yet, his words brought down the wrath of Rin and Cecilia as if they were a tiger sage and a valkyrie.

"Who do you think you are?! What even makes you believe that?"

“Indeed! I demand a retraction!”

They set on Charles as if to devour him. Yet even in such a situation, his smile never left his face. Was this the meaning of noblesse oblige? The French were truly fascinating.

“Hmm. How about this? Why don’t we each pass something around? It’s okay if everyone does it, right?” Charles inquired.

“Sure, sounds good,” I replied.

“If Ichika’s fine with that, then I don’t mind.”

“I would never have such appalling table manners at home, but I suppose this is Japan and isn’t a formal occasion, so... When in Rome?”

It seemed like everyone was on board.

“All right, me first!” Rin suddenly spoke, and snatched the fried chicken from my chopsticks.

“Hey, wait!”

“Wow! This isn’t half bad.”

“Of course. I made it the proper Japanese way,” Houki muttered.

For some reason, even after her chicken was stolen away, Houki’s face held an unconcerned look. Rin herself, on the other hand, looked self-congratulatory. I really didn’t understand how girls thought.

“Ah... Sorry, Houki. That was the last piece of chicken I hadn’t taken a bite of.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. I’m sure you don’t want anything a guy’s bitten into, right? But I don’t have anything else to give you. Everything else we have is the same.”

“Honestly, I don’t mind...”

“Wha— You sure?”

“I-It’s fine. I don’t mind if you’ve taken a bite.”

“Oh? Open wide and say ‘ahh,’ then.”

We can ask people to say “ahh” without a second thought. Was this a privilege reserved for the Japanese?

“Ahh...”

Even if it was a bit awkward, Houki opened her mouth and took the bite of chicken. Looking at her red cheeks, I couldn't tell if she was blushing. Maybe we were getting a little old for this?

"That was pretty good."

"Wasn't it? Your chicken came out great."

"I didn't mean the chicken, but... Yeah. It was great."

I wasn't quite sure what she meant, but I was glad she was in a better mood.

"Ichika! Have some of the sweet-and-sour pork!"

"Ichika, would you care for a sandwich? Or more than one sandwich, actually!"

Rin and Cecilia immediately squeezed up next to me. What was up with them?!

"Here!"

Each of them pushed some food toward me, as if prompting me to open wide.

"W-Wait. Hold on a minute. I already have some sweet-and-sour pork, and I'd honestly rather save the sandwich for last."

"....."

Ah, dammit. A silent insistence meant no counterargument, or room for negotiations. If these two had been around for Romance of the Three Kingdoms, they'd have made great strategists. Perhaps we'd be reading Romance of the Five Kingdoms instead? Yeah, probably not...

"T-Thanks."

Why can't men ever win an argument with women? I know it has been like that since around 2000. Probably for all of history. That sounded about right. Anyway, first up was Rin's sweet-and-sour pork.

"It's good. But Rin. Why's your sweet-and-sour pork warm?"

"I heated it up in the microwave when I went and got rice."

It would've been nice if she heated mine, too. Ah well, it

was still tasty.

"Ahem. Then, next are my handmade sandwiches?"

"Uh... Thanks."

Unable to refuse Cecilia's bashful insistence, I took a bite of the sandwich she offered.

".....?!"

Urk... It was too damn sweet. How?! What did she put in it! There was definitely some vanilla extract, but something else, too. Whatever it was, it was abnormally sweet. It looked like a BLT! Why was it so sweet?! For *argument's* sake, I could maybe accept this much sweetness from an egg sandwich, but...

"How is it?"

—*Ugh. What can I even possibly say...*

"You should be up-front about it."

Rin spoke nonchalantly as she shoveled sweet-and-sour pork into her mouth. That made sense. Honestly, she was right. But, well. It was hard to tell a girl that her cooking was bad.

"Uh... Err, it's... it's not bad. I-I like it."

There I go again, choosing to just be polite. I was a bit taken aback at my own lack of courage.

"Oh, really? Feel free to have them all, then!"

Cecilia's face lit up as she pushed the basket of sandwiches at me. I suppose if I thought of them as dessert I could make it work.

"Idiot."

Rin said as she sipped from a box of Oolong tea.

She must have bought it at the same time as the rice. Whatever, maybe she was right, maybe I am an idiot.

"You know, I feel like a baby bird doing this."

I was glad there were no other students on the roof. If there had been anyone else, I never would have done this. There was no reason someone in high school should ever have to be hand-fed by anyone. Houki didn't seem to mind, though. Maybe it was only embarrassing for men.

"I guess. But there's nothing wrong with that."

"Yeah, that's right. There's nothing wrong with that."

Rin and Cecilia nodded in unison. I wasn't sure, but it seemed like both were blushing.

*—Don't decide now that getting fed is embarrassing!
Especially since I'm the one getting fed!*

"Ichika. Is there anything else you'd like to eat?" Houki said suddenly. "I mean, I guess I have to feed you something too."

"It's fine. Plus, we have the same things other than the chicken, so you'd end up with nothing left."

"Oh... I guess you're right..."

"Anyway, let's finish eating. I don't want to have to run after a meal, but Charles and I have to go all the way out to the arena locker room again."

The hangars were on the close side of the athletic fields, but the locker room we could use was in Arena #1, while the hangars were in #4. It ended up being a pretty long walk. If we spent too long, we'd be doing track and field immediately after lunch. I'd really prefer to avoid that.

"Huh? Wait, do you take off your suit after every practice?" asked Rin.

"What? Aren't you supposed to?" I questioned in return. Wait, did they—

"Around half of us girls just keep ours on. It's too much of a pain to change."

Wow, really? That made sense. They were sweat-wicking and easy to move around in, so there was nothing wrong with keeping them on.

"Meaning..."

Houki and Cecilia probably had theirs on, along with Rin. It wasn't like you could tell through their clothes. It was so much easier to be a girl. Mine went all the way down to my ankles, so it would feel weird to wear under my pants. It'd be too restricting... Well, probably not, but it seems like it'd be a bit warm.

"I told you, stop staring at girls' bodies like that! You creep!"

"What? No, I didn't mean—"

"It doesn't matter what you mean, that still isn't gentlemanly!"

"I was just gazing off—"

"Oh, so you're gazing at us now? How insolent!"

Insolent? Really? Why did they always have to gang up on me, anyway? I let out a sigh as I gave up on arguing. Anyway, I wanted to finish my lunch. All of the food—sorry, except Cecilia's—was good, so we ate quickly as we turned back to our meals.

"....."

"What's wrong, Ichika?"

Charles was, somehow, facing opposite the girls. Naturally, Charles didn't accuse me of anything. He didn't stare at me angrily. He even went out of his way to show genuine concern for me.

"It's great to have another guy around."

It really was. From today on, I had someone battling for the same team as me. It was wonderful. They might even set up a time where we could use the dorm baths. For a variety of reasons, as a man, I couldn't currently use the baths. At first I was supposed to be able to use it as long as I went at a different time, but apparently a large number of students objected.

"How are we supposed to take a bath when a boy's going to be in there after?!"

—*Uh, by sitting down in the water? Is there something wrong with that?*

And it seemed like even more protested when it was suggested that I go before the girls.

"How are we supposed to take a bath after a boy's been in there?!"

—*By sitting down? Wait, didn't I already say that?*

Anyway, it was obviously too much trouble to set up a

time for just one person, so I hadn't been able to take a bath even once. As a bath-lover, it was almost torture.

"Oh, really? I'm not really sure about that, but I'm glad it makes you happy," said Charles.

Was he just being shy? For some reason, that came out a little awkward.

"Great to have another guy, huh."

"How unwholesome."

"That idiot manages to be the last one to realize..."

The three spoke among themselves in hushed voices. I couldn't quite make out what they were saying, but it was probably for the best. For the rest of the day, I endured their disgusted looks. What was up with that? I really didn't understand what women thought.



"Again, I hope we get along well."

"Sure. You too, Ichika."

It was night. After dinner, Charles and I returned to our room. At the cafeteria, we were hemmed in and interrogated by an army of girls curious about the new boy, but we'd managed to cut them off before it started to drag on. As expected, or as was a given, Charles was to share my room. There, I poured him some Japanese tea.

"It's quite different from black tea. I can't quite put my finger on how. It's good, though."

"I'm glad you enjoy it. Let's have some matcha sometime, too."

Cecilia, on the other hand, didn't like Japanese tea at all. Apparently she couldn't stand the color. Was green really that strange?

"Matcha? You mean the stuff you kneel on bamboo mats to drink? I'd heard there was an elaborate ritual. Do you know how to brew it?"

"Matcha's *prepared*, not brewed. I've only had the quick

stuff, though. There's a place near the station that makes it their specialty. You can go there and enjoy it like you would a coffee."

"Oh! Sounds interesting. I'm up for it whenever, I've always wanted to try some."

"All right. We've got plenty to talk about, too. How about this Sunday?"

"Really? That sounds great. Thanks, Ichika."

The subtle smile which sprang to Charles's face sent my heart aflutter for a moment, even though I knew he was a guy. Maybe it was because of his androgynous look and style, but something inside me was deeply confused when he turned that gentle smile my way.

"I've been wanting to have some matcha for a while too, so no big deal."

"Thanks anyway."

Charles, perhaps noticing my embarrassment, gave a somewhat kindly smile. I'd lived with just Chifuyu as far back as I could remember, so I didn't have any way to tell, but maybe this was what a "domestic smile" was? While it was meant to calm me, it only made my mind race more, so I changed the subject.

"So, should we pick an order to shower in? Or I don't mind going day-by-day, either."

"Oh, I'm fine going second. You go first, Ichika."

"Eh? Honestly, saying it like that makes me not want to. Don't you ever want a shower right after practice?"

"Nah, I'll be fine. I don't really sweat much, so I'm not that concerned about showering right away."

"Oh? Anyway, thanks a ton. Don't hesitate to insist sometimes, though. After all, we're both guys."

"Sure. Thanks."

He grinned at me again. Ah, that must have been it. Charles was extremely natural and unforced when thanking people. Seeing a smile like that at exactly the right moment must be what was making my heart skip a beat.

“Speaking of which, I’d heard you always practice after school. Is that true?”

“Yeah. I’m behind everyone else, so I’ve gotta keep on putting in extra practice every day.”

Today was the day Charles moved in—if you could call it that, since he arrived with no luggage and no boxes—so I had skipped practice. However, I had to start back up tomorrow. After all, this month was the tournament.

“Mind if I join in? I owe you one, and besides, it’d probably be helpful since I have my own IS.”

“Oh, that’d be awesome. Thanks.”

“Sure. It’s a deal, then.”

I slept well that night, secure in the knowledge that I’d gained a reassuring ally in both public... and private matters.

Chapter III: Blue Days/Red Switch

"It looks like you have so much trouble against Alcott and Huang just because you don't really understand how guns work."

"Oh, really? I thought I had a decent grasp, but..."

It was Saturday, five days after Charles had arrived. At IS Academy, Saturday mornings were for book classes, while the afternoons were free. Meaning, the arenas were completely open, so most students went for practice. I was no different, and today, after a quick spar with Charles, I listened to him lecture on IS combat.

"Well, it seems like you have the theory down, but not the technique. You weren't able to close in on me at all, right?"

"Ugh, yeah. You saw right through my Ignition Boost..."

"Ichika, your IS is built for melee combat only, so if you don't get a better grasp on how ranged weapons work you'll never be able to win. Especially your Ignition Boost. It goes in a straight line, so I don't even need reflexes to hit you during it, I just need to lead you."

"A straight line... Hmm..."

"It's still better if you don't change course quickly during it, though. The forces that drag would put on your IS might even be enough to break your bones."

"I see..."

I paid close attention to Charles, nodding when appropriate. After all, he was a good explainer. A very good explainer.

My previous self-described coaches had been more like...

"You whoosh in like this, and then bang! Bash!"

"It's easy, see? Just do it by feel. Huh...? Why don't you get it, you idiot?"

"When guarding, tilt the right side of your body five degrees upward and forward. To evade, turn 20 degrees toward the rear."

Yet when I thought I'd reached a dead—literally—end, before me appeared my savior: Charles Dunois. I'd never in a million years be able to say just how grateful I was. So it was perfect that he was a guy and I didn't have to. IS suits always showed off too much skin. It wouldn't matter in a real fight, but practice was practice. Honestly, I always ended up looking somewhere I shouldn't, and it sucked.

"Hmph. It's because you didn't pay any attention to my advice."

"What's your problem? I explained it so simply!"

"Oh, and were you perhaps dissatisfied with my logical advice?"

Ah... Those three self-described coaches were grumbling behind me.

As I mentioned, the arenas were open for use on Saturday afternoons, and each, including the third arena we were in, was packed with practicing students. However, maybe because it had both of the only two male students, it was honestly pretty crowded. Other groups had been crashing into us or hitting us with stray fire all afternoon. I'd crashed into three people myself.

"Ichika, your Byakushiki can't mount an equalizer, right?"

Ah, a lecture from Professor Charles. I'd better listen well. Perhaps because I was hearing it from another man, I was soaking up the knowledge like a sponge soaked up water.

"Yeah. I've looked into it, and it seems it doesn't have any expansion slots free. So there's no way I could install one, supposedly."

"I'm guessing they're all used up on a one-off ability."

"One-off ability? What's that?"

"Just like it says, unique special abilities. They manifest

automatically when an IS is in perfect sync with its pilot.”

Charles’s ability to smoothly deliver such a complex explanation showed how brilliant he really was.

“However, normally they only activate when an IS is in Second Shift. The vast majority of IS don’t manifest them at all, so third-generation IS were developed to make special abilities available to a wider range of pilots. Think Alcott’s Blue Tears or Huang’s Impact Cannon.”

“I see. So, is Byakushiki’s one-off the Reiraku Byakuya?”

Reiraku Byakuya... Byakushiki’s strongest attack, it could pierce through any energy field. However, it was a double-edged sword—it drained my own shield energy, like a cursed weapon from a game that drained its wielder’s life gauge.

“Byakushiki’s activation of its ability in First Shift is extremely unusual. There’s nothing else like it. Or maybe one thing... Wasn’t Ms. Orimura’s IS the same, when she was the first Brynhildr?”

I was pretty sure, yeah. Chifuyu’s didn’t just have the same weapon, it was like mine in that way, too. Almost like it was destined.

“I mean, it makes sense. We are brother and sister.”

“Well, I’m sure there’s more reason for it. As I said before, because it’s so closely linked to an IS’ bond with its pilot, no amount of effort has been able to deliberately recreate an ability.”

“Oh. Anyway, it’s not like we’re gonna figure it out standing here chatting, so let’s forget about that, for now.”

“Hmm. Yeah, I guess. Anyway, let’s move on to ranged weapons practice. Here you go.”

As he spoke, Charles handed me the .55-caliber ‘Vento’ assault rifle he’d been using.

“Wait, what? Since when can you use someone else’s weapons?”

“They’re normally locked to an IS. But if the user unlocks them, they can add anyone. Here, I just set it to accept Ichika and the Byakushiki. Give it a shot.”

“Okay.”

This was the first time I had ever felt the weight of a gun. It seemed like the IS’ energy field kept it from being too heavy, but it may just have been my own psychological bias to holding a new weapon for the first time.





"Is this how you hold it?"

"Hmm... Bring your arms in. And hold your left forearm like this. Got it?"

Charles lightly moved behind me, using the IS' ability of flight to expertly guide me even though our heights were so different.

"It uses gunpowder so it'll have a recoil when you fire, but don't worry too much about it, most IS automatically compensate. Have you set up your sensor link?"

"The one for shooting? I've been looking, but I can't find it."

I'd be firing in rapid mode, so linking with my hypersensor was necessary. The hypersensor needed to be linked with the weapon in order to transfer necessary data, including the targeting sight, to the IS' pilot, but I'd been looking through Byakushiki's menus and couldn't find it.

"Huh, I thought even a melee IS would have it, but..."

"Well, looks like this one doesn't."

"It really is 100% close-combat only, huh. Looks like you're going to have to do this by eye, then."

What a handicap for someone who'd never even shot a gun. Ah well, I could grumble, but it wouldn't have changed anything. Time to give it a try.

"Here I go."

"Sure. Just taking a few shots should make a big difference."

Charles was probably right, I'd never know how it felt without trying it. I took a deep breath, and curled my finger around the trigger.

Bang!

"Whoa!"

The sound of exploding powder shocked me. Was it this intense firing without an IS?

"How was it?"

"Well, uh. First off, it's fast."

I'd known that bullets traveled fast, of course, but

actually shooting gave me a whole new understanding. There was also the recoil. Even though it was mostly compensated for, it was still completely different from swinging a sword, and feeling it for the first time made my heart pound.

"That's right. It's fast. Even if you're moving fast, that bullet is moving a little bit faster. So as long as your opponent leads their fire, it's easy to land a hit, or at least zone you. You may feel like you're going all-out, but there's always going to be that little bit of hesitation."

"So they're able to open up a gap, and then attack..."

"Yeah."

Ah. So it was like that, huh? That must have been why Houki, who was also a melee specialist, sometimes ended up in such one-sided fights against Rin and Cecilia. I understood everything now.

"Why do you think I tried so many times to drill it into your head?"

"You didn't even understand that? What an idiot!"

"I'd thought you at least understand that much before you came up with what passes as your plan of attack."

—*Oh, what's this?*

Words of shock and disgust reached my ears. Yeah. Communication was vital. We should have spoken more, in order to understand each other. With perspectives starting so far apart, scattered conversations just confused us...

"Anyway, keep going. Finish off that magazine."

"Oh, thanks."

Having relaxed a bit, I fired off short bursts of two or three shots. As I felt the recoil travel up my arm, I thought about how I'd avoid each one while closing in.

"Oh, by the way, Charles—your IS is a Revive, right?"

"Yeah. Ah, your arms are drifting out. Be sure to bring them back together after every burst."

"Okay. Like this?"

"Yeah, that's it. Oh, and you should bring the gun up so

it's pointing along your line of sight. If you have to turn your head to fire, you can't react as quickly."

While I listened to his explanation, I brought up a question I'd been curious about.

"By the way... Your IS is pretty different from Ms. Yamada's. Are you sure they're the same model?"

Ms. Yamada's Rafale Revive, Revive for short, was navy blue and mounted four multi-thrusters, giving it a unique silhouette. Meanwhile, Charles's was different in more than just color.

A single thruster extended from the center of its back, splitting into two wings and imparting greater acceleration and maneuverability. Its armor was also more streamlined than Ms. Yamada's, and its multi-weapon rack formed a rear skirt. It also had smaller thrusters, presumably for attitude control. But the biggest difference was its shoulder armor, with all four shields removed. Instead, the left armguard mounted a shield directly, while the right arm had nothing but form-fitting armor in order to not interfere with firing.

"It's a customized one for me, so they tweaked a lot. Actually, it's officially called the 'Rafale Revive Custom.' It also removes a number of presets, doubling the expansion capacity."

"Double?! Wow, that's incredible. I wish you could share some with me."

"Ahahah. I would if I could. But yeah, this thing is so customized that I've got around twenty weapons installed."

"Wow, it's like a walking arsenal."

They were likely all IS weaponry, too, so it was definitely not the kind of firepower you'd want to mess with. No exaggeration, it was enough to rival dozens... No, hundreds of main battle tanks.

On the other hand, though. Cecilia and Rin had five, maybe eight at most, weapons. The reason being, they couldn't use any more at once, and more importantly, the delay involved in calling them up made them useless, even

if they were installed. Knowing that, maybe this customization implied that Charles also had some kind of special ability.

“Hey, isn’t that—”

“No way! It’s the German third-gen IS!”

“I’d heard it was still in testing in Germany.”

The arena suddenly fell silent, and I shifted my gaze to a new target as I finished off the last of the magazine’s sixteen shots.

“.....”

There stood a single transfer student: Germany’s National Cadet, Laura Bodewig.

Since the day she arrived, that lonely girl hadn’t grouped up with any of the other girls—hadn’t even made conversation. I hadn’t spoken with her, either. After all, she slapped me out of nowhere. How was I supposed to approach her?

—*Hmm, maybe try to laugh it off?*

“You.”

A voice came over the open channel. The same as our first meeting. One I couldn’t forget. It was Laura’s voice.

“What?”

This couldn’t be good, but I wasn’t able to ignore her. After I replied, Laura spoke while rising lightly into the air.

“So you have your own IS, too. It’s simple, then. Fight me.”

What was she going on about? Did she just love to fight?

“Nah. No reason to.”

“You may not have one, but I do.”

Oh, right. There was only one thing that came to mind when I thought of Germany and Chifuyu. The championship match of the second Mondo Grosso tournament. It wasn’t a memory I enjoyed recalling, but that was exactly why I would never be able to forget it. To be completely honest, the day of the championship match, I was kidnapped by a shadowy organization.

—Ugh, that sounds really lame, like something from a TV show. But they were definitely shadowy, and definitely an organization, so I'm going to have to go with it.

I still wasn't sure what exactly they wanted, but they had me tied up in a dark room. It was dark, so I couldn't tell exactly how long I was there, but suddenly the entire building shook. Light entered the room through a collapsing wall, forming a halo around Chifuyu in her IS. When she'd heard, she had flown directly from the tournament ring. I could never forget how she looked then. Her cool dignity... her strength... and her beauty... Of course, this meant she forfeited the championship match, and wasn't able to grasp the laurels twice in a row. Everyone had expected Chifuyu to win, so her lack of participation caused quite a shock.

No demands were made following my kidnapping, but a person connected to the Bundeswehr had managed to put together a picture of where I was being held from their own private sources. To pay back that debt, Chifuyu spent a year there after the tournament as a military IS trainer. After this, I had lost track of her for a while as she left that position and then came to IS Academy as an instructor.

"If it wasn't for you, she'd likely have become a two-time champion. Therefore, I can't accept you—can't accept your existence."

Right, right. She wasn't just one of Chifuyu's students, but probably quite fascinated with her as well. So she must hate me for leaving that black mark on Chifuyu's record. Honestly, I kind of understood it. I still couldn't forgive myself for how powerless I was that day. But that was one thing. This was something else. I had no reason to fight Laura. No inclination to, either.

"Maybe later."

"Hmph. If you won't fight, I'll have to make you fight!"

As she spoke, Laura shifted her pitch-black IS into combat mode. In an instant, the muzzle of the cannon on her left shoulder belched fire.

“.....!”

Clang!

“Starting a fight in the middle of a crowd like this... You Germans sure are hot-headed. Didn’t you learn your lesson the last couple times?”

“Damn you...” bellowed Laura.

Charles had moved in from my flank, blocking the shot with his shield while he took his .61-caliber ‘Garm’ assault cannon in his right hand and trained it on Laura.

“Oh, a French antique! How quaint.”

“Still, probably more useful than another German vanity prototype.”

The two gave each other chill glares. Charles’s quick reaction had amazed me, but what was even more incredible was how quickly he readied his weapons. What normally took a second or two, he did in an instant, at the same time as he aimed.

Oh, I see. It was because he could do that that the Revive had so many expansion slots. This way, he could adjust to different combat situations without having to pre-select a loadout. He could also reload quickly. In other words, it was a significant advantage in drawn-out battles. It was also advantageous to be able to choose a weapon after you saw your enemy’s. I understood both why Charles was a National Cadet and why he used a customized mass-production IS.

“You there! What are you doing?! Give me your year, class, and seat number!”

A voice rang out over the arena PA. The teacher on duty must have noticed the commotion.

“Hmph... That’s enough for today.”

Maybe two interruptions were enough to take the wind out of Laura’s sails, as she disengaged combat mode and left toward the arena gates. The teacher was likely in a rage, but from what I could tell of Laura’s personality, she’d simply ignore her.

“Ichika, are you okay?”

"Y-Yeah. Thanks, you saved me."

The sharp look in his eyes only a few seconds before when he was staring down Laura was gone. A Normal, kind, gentle Charles peered at my face.

"Let's call it quits for today. It's past four, so it's closing time, anyway."

"Yeah. You're right. Thanks for the gun, by the way. It helped me figure out a lot."

"That's good."

He gave another slight grin. His vulnerability always awoke something strange deep within me, but that wasn't what I was worried about right now.

"Hmm... Anyway, why don't you go ahead and change?"

This again. Charles never wanted to change with me after practice. Never mind not wanting to, he hadn't actually done it even once. Even before practice, other than that first day, he'd always either already had his suit on or managed to change before me. And what I really couldn't understand was why Charles, who was always so measured and cool-headed while giving instructions during practice, got so awkward when we went back to our room.

Now that I remembered—

"Whew, that was refreshing. Shower's open!"

"Ichika! Why are you naked?!"

"Huh? I've got clothes on. Pants, at least."

"Put a shirt on, too! And you need to do something about your hair!"

"You don't need to tell me to do that."

"Yes I do! You need to take better care of yourself!"

"C'mon, we're just guys here. What's up with you always coming out of there all dressed up? You ain't gotta worry about it."

"Ichika, you do need to worry about it! Ugh, I give up!"

—was not an unusual conversation.

I didn't know why, but Charles had a lot of things to say when we were alone together. And it seemed like he wasn't

nitpicking, he actually cared. I guess he was the mothering type? I didn't know my own parents, but from what I could imagine based on what I'd heard from the Gotandas, I guess that's how you'd put it. Anyway, though. Finally having a roommate, especially another guy, I felt like it was important to become closer friends. Okay, time to turn on the charm.

"So, why don't we change together sometime?"

"I don't want to."

"C'mon, don't be so cold."

"I'm not being cold, just... Why do you want to change with me?"

"Why? More like, how come you don't want to change with me?"

Answering a question with a question was a bit rude, but I'd learned over the past few days that it was best to be a bit forceful with Charles, so it was for the best.

"Well... I'm embarrassed to..."

That's a funny answer. Charles may have been slender, but he looked pretty toned. What was there to be embarrassed about?

"It'll be fine once you get used to it. Let's do it right now."

"Wait, um, er..."

His gaze wandered toward the ceiling as he searched for a good excuse.

—All right, one more push!

"Hey, Char—"

Gulp.

"Sure, sure, whatever. Now get going. If you don't know when to back down, no one's going to want to be friends with you."

I felt a pinch on the back of my neck. Ugh, that hurt. Stop it, Rin. Rin, stop it.

"Ahem! It seems like you'd very much like to change with someone. While I can't say I'm enthusiastic about the prospect, I suppose I simply have no choice. Very well, I'll change with—"

“We have to change, too. Hurry it up, Cecilia.”

“Houki! Stop pinching my ne— Okay! I’ll be right there! Of course! Definitely the girls’ locker room!” she cried.

Houki had applied a neck pinch, cutting off Cecilia’s protests. What? Was neck-pinching a class skill for childhood friends? And when did they end up on a first-name basis? At first they’d seemed quite antagonistic, but I guess time had changed things. Now they were close enough to call each other by name. Did they face off before the setting sun, trading blows—well, sniping, back and forth—until night? You know, that “Not bad!”, “You’re not so shabby either.” thing. Though, that probably would end up with fisticuffs either way.

—*That’s no good. Violence solves nothing.*

“Rin.”

“What?”

“Violence solves nothing.”

Bam!

“And that was violence.”

Ouch! She hit me on the head! And I had just told her it would solve nothing, too.

“Don’t tell me not to do something I haven’t done, idiot.”

Anyway, there was no reason to stand around getting beat on, and the arena was about to close. It was time to go change.

“Fine, I’ll go ahead.”

“Sure.”

After a quick word to Charles, I headed toward the gate. Lately, I’d gotten used to sudden acceleration and stops, so I more or less had a handle on IS control.

“This place sure is luxurious.”

The locker room stretched out before me. There were fifty or so lockers, and more than enough room for fifty people to use them. Returning Byakushiki to its gauntlet standby form, I slouched down on a bench as I pulled off my IS suit.

“Ugh, I’d kill for a bath...”

Even if the suit absorbed it, I had still sweated a lot. So I really wanted to soak both my body and my soul. Rumor was that Ms. Yamada was looking into changing the bath schedule now that there were two boys. I was grateful.

"All right, done changing."

Men's clothing was so convenient. I was finished before I was even done thinking.

"Orimura, Dunois, are you there?"

"Yes? It's just me, Orimura."

Someone was calling for me from outside the door. It seemed like it was Ms. Yamada. Speak of the devil.

"Can I come in? You're not still changing, are you?"

For some reason, when people called out from afar their sentences were inflected. It was funny. Not that I was any different.

"Nah, I'm fine. I already changed."

"Oh, good. Then, if you'll pardon me..."

The door slid open, and Ms. Yamada entered. I still thought the noise of the pressure-operated mechanism sounded really cool.

"Isn't Dunois here too? I'd heard that you were training with him earlier."

"I think he's still in the arena. Check the pits maybe? Anyway, what's up? If it's a big deal, I can track him down."

"Oh, it's nothing that big. You can tell him later. Um... Beginning later this month, you'll be able to use the baths. Setting shifts seemed like it would cause a lot of problems, so instead, you boys will have them for two days a week."

"Really?!"

This was big news. Extremely big news. I would finally be able to take a bath. I was so overcome with gratitude that I grasped Ms. Yamada's hand as I replied.

"I'm overjoyed. That's wonderful. Thank you so much, Ms. Yamada!"

"I-It's, um, just my job..."

That might well be true, but I was still filled with thanks. I

was overcome with the drive to thank her more enthusiastically.

"No, really, it's all thanks to you. Thank you so much!"

"R-Really? Teehee. You're making me blush."

It was then that I realized. I was alone with a woman teacher in a locker room, grasping her hand passionately. This couldn't end well. Something terrible was bound to happen.

"Ichika...? What are you doing?"

My heart pounded. No, wait. It was just Charles. Phew.

"You're still in the locker room? What are you doing holding a teacher's hand?"

"Oh, uh. It's nothing."

I released my grasp on her hand. Ms. Yamada, likewise, was embarrassed by Charles's comment, and spun around as I let go.

"Ichika, I thought you said you'd be heading back first."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry."

For some reason, it seemed like there were barbs in Charles's speech. But his expression was no different from normal. I must have been overthinking it.

"Rejoice, Charles. Beginning later this month, we'll be able to use the baths!"

"Oh."

Charles glared at me sideways as he removed his IS and began to towel his head off. He really did seem to be in a bad mood. That was too bad, you'd think the good news would have have him excited, too.

"Oh, actually, there's something else I wanted to talk with you about, Orimura. There's some paperwork I need you to fill out, so could you come to the faculty room? It has to do with Byakushiki's registration, so there's a fair amount there."

"Got it. You should shower first today, Charles. This'll probably take a while."

"Sure. Okay."

“All right. Let’s go, Ms. Yamada.”



“Sigh...”

Closing the door, Charles, alone in the dorm, leaked out a sigh. Maybe holding it in for so long was what made it so surprisingly long and deep.

“What am I so mad about, anyway?”

The awkwardness in the locker room was still embarrassing. Realizing that Ichika, too, was shocked by it made things even worse.

“Maybe... I’ll take a shower and calm myself down.”

Charles pulled a change of clothes from the closet and left for the shower.



“Phew, finally done.”

There had definitely been plenty of paperwork, but most of it didn’t need much more than a signature, so it went quicker than I had expected. It seemed like I was now officially the pilot of Byakushiki, though that was a paperwork distinction that probably wouldn’t change much.

“I’m back. Huh...? Charles, where are you?”

As I wondered, the sound of running water echoed from the shower.

“Ah, he must be in the shower.”

—*Now that I think of it, didn’t he say we ran out of body wash yesterday?*

As I remembered what Charles said, I pulled a spare bottle out of the closet. I’d thought I would take the first shower today, so I could just bring some with me when I went.

—*He probably wishes he had this now. I’ll bring it to him.*

The shower room was with a door between the shower and the changing area.

—I should bring it to the changing area and then yell to him.

I thought as I entered the shower room.

Click.

Click? Hmm. I'd already opened the door to enter, so why did I hear that? Oh, right, Charles must have opened the shower door. He must be looking for some body wash.

"Oh, good timing. I brought another bottle of—"

"I-I-I-Ichika?"

"Huh?"

The person who entered the shower room was a girl I'd never seen. How did I know it was a girl? Simple. She had breasts.

Her damp hair was a wavy blonde, soft and supple. Sleek and long-legged, her slender waist accentuated her breasts, making them seem even larger than they were. With blonde hair and amethyst eyes, I knew she couldn't be Japanese. Perhaps that was why her—around C-cups?—were still exceptionally perky. The droplets of water perched on her young skin like gems, almost like she was set with precious stones.

And she was naked. Completely naked. I knew inside my head that I had to look away, but my eyes were fixated as if pinned down.

"I... Er, uh..."

Somehow, I felt like I'd seen the naked girl before me somewhere before, but I was so confused I couldn't think.

—Hmm, blonde... Blond?





“Eek!”

Slam!

The girl had overcome her shock, and covered her breasts immediately while fleeing into the shower. The loud slam of the door brought me back to my senses, and I listened to the flowing water.

“Um...”

“.....”

There was no response from beyond the door. She was probably as speechless as I was.

“I’m leaving the body wash here.”

“O-Okay...”

With an exchange that may or may not have been a conversation, I placed the bottle by the shower door and left.

“.....”

—*What’s going on here? I’d thought Charles was in the shower... Wait, was that him?!*

Now that I thought about it, it didn’t seem too far-fetched. If he let his hair down, it would probably be about like that. But that wasn’t the biggest problem.

—*Something’s not right here. Why does Charles have breasts? Mmm, breasts...*

The sight was still burned into the inside of my eyelids.

—*Those... were some beautiful breasts.*

There was no way. It couldn’t be. Though, I couldn’t rule it out completely...

—*It’s better to just not think about it. Clear your mind, and let troubles fade away.*

Click.

“.....?!”

A quiet, almost apologetic click as the door to the changing area opened. Yet to me, it was the loudest sound I’d heard in my life, and I involuntarily cowered.

“I’m coming out.”

“Okay.”

The voice I heard from behind me was definitely Charles. I

tried to ignore my heart pounding in my chest as I turned around.

In front of me... Was a girl.



"....."
"....."

We had spent an hour like this. I, and the girl in front of me—Charles's true identity—sat on our beds, facing toward each other, but silently avoiding each others' gazes.

"Well, um..."

I decided to break the ice. As I spoke, she—Charles, trembled.

—*C'mon, it shouldn't be that shocking...*

"Would you like some tea?"

"S-Sure. If you don't mind."

It seemed we both agreed that a drink would make it easier to talk. At least we were finally on the same page about something. Anyway, I boiled water in the electric kettle and poured it into my teapot.

"....."
"....."

As we waited for the tea to steep, the silence returned. As much as I wished I could, there was no rushing the tea leaves.

"It should be good now. Here."

"Oh, tha— Eek!"

As I passed the mug, our fingertips brushed together, and Charles, flustered, pulled back her hand. Unthinkingly, I tightened my grip on the mug to keep from dropping it, and in response tea sloshed out on my hand.

"Ow, that's hot! Water! Water!"

I ran to the sink, and opened the tap as far as possible. The rush of water cooled my hand, and it seemed the crisis was mostly averted.

"S-Sorry! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I should be fine. As long as you cool it off quickly, you don't really get burnt."

"Let me see it... You're bright red. I'm really sorry."

Seemingly a little bit panicked, Charles had rushed to my side and pulled my hand toward her, staring at the part where tea had splashed with a pained expression.

"I'll go get some ice!"

"Wait, wait. You can't go out like that. I'll get it myself in a moment."

Charles was wearing her tailored track jacket like usual, but maybe it was because I knew her secret, that she had dispensed with the special corset she used to hold down her breasts. With how tightly her jacket fit, her breasts were obvious.

"But..."

"Actually, uhh. Your breasts... They've been rubbing on me."

".....!"

As if she had only realized her own position after it had been mentioned, Charles leapt backwards, her arms crossed over her chest.

"....."

Even if it was just a little bit, her eyes carried that accusing stare only women were capable of.

"And here I was worried about you... Ichika, you pervert..."

"What?!"

Impossible! I was being treated as a villain. How absurd! Such falsehood! Maybe I was imagining things, but for a moment I hoped that maybe it wasn't accusatory, but a mix of embarrassment and a dash of joy. Yeah... I must have been imagining things. What girl would be happy about a guy she didn't like touching her?

"Phew. It's cooled down enough, I should be fine. Anyway, let's try that again."

"Okay."

This time, I managed to pass the mug to Charles, and we each took a sip of our tea. After we moistened our throats, I made my way to the question I'd been turning over in my mind.

"So why have you been pretending to be a man?"

"My... my family made me do it..."

"Huh? Your family, as in the Dunoises?"

"That's right. My father is the company president. It was a direct order from him."

What? Something didn't seem quite right here. When the conversation turned to her family, a gloom descended over Charles's face.

"An order? From your father? How does that..."

"I... I'm the daughter of one of his mistresses."

"....."

Silence, again. Being 15, I was old enough to know how the world worked. I wasn't so innocent and sheltered enough to not know what that meant.

"I was adopted by my father two years ago. Soon after my mother's death, his employees came for me. After rigorous testing, they determined that I was highly-suited to pilot an IS, and I was assigned as an unofficial test pilot for Dunois."

Charles was bravely working her way through a story she probably didn't want to recall, so I listened intently, letting her finish.

"I've only met my father twice. Only spoken a few sentences with him. We lived in separate houses, and just once, he called me to his. It was terrible. His wife even hit me, and she called me 'that homewrecker's brat.' It really ate at me. If Mom had told me a bit more, at least I wouldn't have been so bewildered."

Charles let loose a forced chuckle, too dry by far to have been a true laugh. I didn't return it. And I suppose she didn't want me to. For some reason, anger welled up inside me, and I clenched my fists to hold it back.

"Shortly after, Dunois entered a financial crisis."

“Wait, what? Don’t they have the third highest global share of mass produced IS?”

“Yes, but the Revive is still a second-generation IS. IS development is incredibly expensive—most companies in the industry receive direct government support. And France had withdrawn from the EU’s joint ‘Ignition Plan’ defense project. The need for a third-generation IS was urgent. Yet, no matter how necessary it was for our defense, a country with neither an expansive budget, nor first-mover’s advantage, inevitably suffered.”

Now that I thought of it, Cecilia had talked about the development of third-generation IS a few times.

“The European Union is currently conducting testing to determine the primary supplier of its third-generation Ignition Plan IS. The proposals under evaluation are our Tears, the German Regen, and the Italian Tempesta. Ours is currently the closest to production-readiness, but it’s by no means decided yet. Therefore, I was sent to IS Academy to gather data under field conditions.”

Or so I recalled. That was likely why Laura transferred here from Germany, as well.

“Back to the point. Therefore, while Dunois began development of a third-generation IS, it was in fact based off a very late second-generation project. Extremely short on both time and useful data, the project failed to take form. Then, a notice arrived from the government that the budget had been trimmed significantly. And that if it wasn’t selected at the next trial, all further funding would also cut completely, and Dunois’ IS development license would be stripped.”

“I think I get it, but why did you come posing as a man?”

“It’s simple. As a billboard for our product. And—” Charles avoided eye contact, her voice betraying a bit of frustration. “It would be easiest to get close to a similar example in Japan if I also posed as a boy. If possible, I was to get data on both his IS and him himself.”

“Meaning...”

“Yes. I was sent to steal data on Byakushiki. That’s what he told me to do.”

From what I was hearing, Charles’s father was just taking advantage of her. The sort of “She’s good with an IS, so let’s use that!” and nothing else. Surely she felt it much more intensely than I did, though. That must be why she was talking about her own father as if he was unrelated to her. In her mind, he wasn’t “Dad,” he was just some guy.

“And that’s how it is. Now that you’ve found me out, I’m sure I’ll be called home to France. As for the company.. I’m sure it will either collapse or be bought out, certainly never be the same, but I don’t really care.”

“.....”

“That took a real load off me. Thanks for listening. And sorry for lying to you.”

Charles bowed deeply, but when I realized she was doing so I reached out to her shoulders and pulled her face back level.

“Are you okay with that, though?”

“Eh...?”

“Are you okay with that? You can’t be. It doesn’t matter what he says. Why does someone have the right to take away your freedom just because he’s your parent? That isn’t right!”

“I-Ichika?”

Charles’s face was a bit puzzled, and a bit frightened. But, I couldn’t find the right words. More than anything, I couldn’t get a hold of my feelings.

“I mean, you wouldn’t be here without him, that much is true, but it’s absurd to think that that should give him absolute authority over you. Everyone has the right to choose how they’re going to live. And your parents don’t get to say any different!”

As I spoke, I realized I wasn’t really talking about Charles here—I was talking about myself. And I couldn’t help but

think about Chifuyu, who went through so much because of *them*.

"What's wrong? Is something bothering you, Ichika?"

"Ah, yeah. Sorry... I got too worked up there."

"That's okay. Just tell me what's wrong."

"I was—Chifuyu and I were abandoned by our parents."

"Oh..."

Charles looked at me for a moment, with a face that implied she had recalled something tragic, and then looked down apologetically.

"I'm... sorry to hear that."

"Don't worry about it. Chifuyu is enough family for me. I wouldn't even care to meet my parents. Anyway, what do you want to do now?"

"Well... it's just a matter of time. When the French government finds out the truth, they won't be able to stay uninvolved. My status as National Cadet will be revoked, and if I'm lucky, I'll only be jailed."

"And you're okay with that?"

"It doesn't matter if I'm okay with it or not. I don't get to choose. It's going to happen."

Charles's faint grin was filled with pain. It betrayed her despairing resignation. I couldn't forgive anyone who made her feel like that. At the same time, I was angry at myself for not being able to do anything. Not being able to help a friend filled me with frustration.

"Then why not stay here?"

"Huh?"

"According to Article 21: While enrolled, students are not subject to the authority of any nation, organization, or group. Outside interference without their consent is not permitted."

— *That's it. That'll work.*

As it sprang to mind, my anger receded, and I recited the text so smoothly I was almost disgusted with myself.

"Meaning... as long as you're here, you're safe for at least

three years. That'll give you time to figure out a solution. You don't need to rush into one."

"Ichika..."

"Huh? What?"

"You remembered well. There are, what, fifty-five articles?"

"I... work hard."

"You sure do."

Charles finally laughed. Her expression was the carefree smile of a 15-year-old girl.

My pulse is pounding again... Looking again, what I noticed most wasn't even her beauty, but her kindness. That must be what made her look so adorable to me. Seeing her unguardedness made my heart beat even faster.

"Anyway, it's up to you to decide, so you should think it over."

"Sure. I will."

It seemed like we were moving on from the more awkward topics, but maybe I should have pressed a bit harder. Thinking this made me turn my eyes to Charles again, and our gazes met.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing."

Charles peered at my face. I was unsure whether she knew what I was thinking or not, and now it wasn't just her vulnerability. The top of her cleavage peeking out from her neckline was enough to make my heart beat like a drum.

"Anyway, uh... Could you back up, Charles?"

"Huh?"

"Well, uh, your breasts..."

At their mention, Charles blushed a bright red.

—*She was like this before, too, wasn't she.*

"Ichika, you keep talking about my breasts... Do you want to see them?"

"What?!"

"....."

“.....”

I was nervous, unsure of what she really intended. For some reason she fell silent, her face still beet-red, and a different kind of awkwardness set in.

Knock, knock.

“.....?!”

“Ichika, are you there? You haven’t eaten yet. You aren’t sick or anything, are you?”

Charles and I each froze, stock still at the sudden knock.

“Ichika? Can I come in?”

—*This is bad. Really bad. Really, really bad. Even a moron would be able to tell Charles was a girl if they saw her now.*

“What do we do?”

“Just hide for now.”

We whispered quietly back and forth. Our faces were quite close, but we didn’t have time to think about that.

“Okay. I’ll just sneak into here...”

“Wha— Why the closet?! Use the bed! Just cover yourself up with blankets, you’ll be fine!”

“Oh! Good idea!”

Charles and I each scrambled.

Click. The sound of the door opening echoed.

“Oh, hey, Cecilia! What’s up? What’d you need?”

“Did I interrupt something?”

What she saw was Charles, who had just dived into bed, and me, lying on top while pulling a blanket over her. It was certainly an unusual sight to open a door and find one resident lying on top of another over a blanket. Cecilia gave a doubtful expression, as if trying to make sure she was really seeing this.

“Oh, Charles thinks he has a cold, so I was tucking him in. No big deal, right?”

“And... is lying on top of a sick person a traditional Japanese cure?”

Of course not. It wasn’t a traditional anywhere cure. Who the hell would come up with something like that?

"Anyway, uh, Charles isn't feeling well, so he's taking a nap. He isn't hungry, so I'm just going to have to go alone."

"That's right."

Charles's voice leaked out from under the blanket.

—*C'mon, put a little more effort into sounding sick!*

"Cough, cough."

—*Could you make it any more obvious that you were faking? This isn't going to work, is it.*

"Oh, is that so? I still haven't gotten supper, as well. Shall we go together? Indeed. Such an unusual coincidence."

We had seemingly fooled Cecilia, and she turned her attention toward dinner with me. I needed to remember to bring a meal back for Charles, though.

"Cough, cough. Enjoy."

"Sure."

"Take care, Dunois. Ichika, shall we be off?"

As she spoke, she took my arm. The British were natural at gestures which Japanese shied back from. I was uncomfortable with such close contact, but endured it as to not aggravate the situation. We left my room, and walked toward the staircase. As we were about to descend, I heard a shout.

"Wh-What are you two doing?!"

Rapid footsteps sounded from the end of the hall. I didn't even have to look to know... that it was Houki.

"Oh, Houki! *We* were simply on our way to dinner," said Cecilia.

There was a bit of extra emphasis on that "we." Maybe she placed some extra meaning on it; one of those things I didn't get that only girls seemed to do.

"And why are you holding hands, huh?!"

"Is it not only natural for a lord to escort his lady?"

So it was like that, huh. I kept ending up as someone's escort. And, now... Houki was glaring at me. Why was it my fault?

"And Ichika! What about you?! You knew I was going to

wait for you in the cafeteria!”

“I wasn’t even...”

I mean, I had other, more important, things to take care of. Anyway, wasn’t it kind of rude to just tell people you’d be waiting and expect them to show up?

“In any case, we’re on our way to supper, so if you don’t mind...”

“W-Wait! I’ll come along, too. I was just on my way to dinner!”

Huh? Really?

“Oh my, Houki. Are you sure a fourth meal a day won’t make you put on even more weight?”

“No need to worry about that. I’ll just burn the calories off at practice.”

—*You mean at the Kendo club you never show up at? The rest of the team is crying.*

They got a new member who’d made nationals, and then she didn’t even show up. Houki, I appreciate that we get to practice together after school, but you should go to club from time to time, too. Wouldn’t want you to lose your edge.

“Oh, I had my parents send me this. I was going to practice with it later, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

She held up a—wow. A katana. It was sheathed, but it was still immediately obvious what it was. A famous blade passed down since the Edo era—in other words, live steel.

“Its name is Akeyoi. One of the final creations of the famous smith Akarugi You.”

Akarugi You. After marrying a swordswoman, he abandoned his previous work and they settled deep in the Hida Mountains. There, he crafted “swords for women.”

“Women beating men.”

This theme of grace over power influenced his craft until the end of his days. Of course, he’d probably never have started on it if he hadn’t met his wife. Akarugi You finally arrived at two principles of fencing:

“Let cuts flow off your blade like water, until you draw

close—then strike in a flash,” and “Draw swiftly your blade, and with it strike swifter still.”

Houki’s blade hewed to the latter—a blade longer and more slender than a standard katana, with a longer sheath to match. Yet somehow, it was quicker to unsheath than a shorter blade. I’d heard the reason was the smoother sheath and the circular path of the stroke, combined with footwork. Still, though, was the government okay with this? A high school student walking around armed with a—oh, wait. This was IS Academy, proclaimed by both law and treaty as belonging to no nation.

“Then, let’s go.”

What? Huh? Why was Houki standing next to me? Wait! Why was she grabbing my arm?!

“Houki... whatever are you doing?”

“It’s only natural for a man to escort a lady, right?”

—*Escort? Jeez... You two are only going to the cafeteria.*

Yet now I had Cecilia hanging from my left arm, and Houki from my right.

—*C’mon, if we walk like this no one’s going to be able to get by us coming up the stairs.*

Everyone was staring at us, too.

“God, I wish that were me...”

“That’s double-dipping.”

“No fair getting a head start!”

“No fair having your own IS!”

Hm? Why was everyone giving Houki and Cecilia jealous looks. And why did they look so smug and self-satisfied? Was being escorted by a man that great?

“Um...”

“What?”

“What is it?”

“It’s hard to walk like this...”

My arms were wrenched in stereo. What was wrong with these two?!

“Don’t you have anything better to say right now?”

“A man who doesn’t recognize his own fortune is lower than a dog.”

Fortune? Was it considered fortunate, in Britain, to have both arms twisted at once? Sorry, but that isn’t my kind of thing at all.

“Anyway, whatever. Let’s get something to eat, okay?”

That was enough to get them moving again, but soon, another problem arose.

“Today’s fish dinner is sawara mackerel. It’s delicious.”

Smoosh.

“I’d heard today’s western meal is carbonara. Would you like some, too?”

Smoosh.

“Well, uh, they both sound good.”

I was being completely honest, they did both sound good. There was something else that I was trying to get away from right then. With us walking arm-in-arm-in-arm, it was rather difficult to pass. So they each pressed up close to me, and with each step my arm felt—something soft, girlish, swelling, something I tried not to think about but couldn’t help but realize what it was.

“What’s wrong, Ichika?”

“Is something the matter?”

Smooooosh.

Each leaned their face even closer to mine. My arms could feel their breasts squeeze through their clothes.

“Oh, it’s nothing! It was nothing at all. It won’t be a big deal.”

I worked my way through the tenses to try and keep my grip. Tense—that was an appropriate way to think of it, all things considered. What I actually ended up eating for dinner completely slipped my mind.



“I’m back.”

“Hey, Ichika. Hm? What’s wrong? You seem worked up over something.”

“Ah, don’t worry about it. I’m fine. You must be famished, though. I got you a fish dinner, think you’re up to it?”

“Sure, thanks.”

Charles grinned as she took the tray from me, but her expression hardened as she placed it on the table.

“What’s wrong?”

“Uhhh...”

“Hurry up, or it’ll get cold. Someone worked hard to make that, you should eat it while it’s still warm.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Thanks.”

Charles seemed to be holding an awkward smile, and I quickly understood why.

“Ah...”

Plop.

“Ah, uh...”

Plop, plop.

Charles let out a sigh as her food fell back to the plate again. She picked up the fish. Or at least tried to, but it wasn’t going so well. Now that I thought of it, this was the first time I’d seen Charles use chopsticks.

“Are you having trouble with the chopsticks?”

“Yeah. I’ve practiced, but it’s still not— Ah...”

Once again, the fish fell. It was landing on the plate, so it was still edible, but at this rate she’d never finish her meal.

“Sorry. I’ll go get you a spoon.”

“Eh? N-No, I don’t need one. I’ll finish eventually.”

“Are you sure? It looks like you’re having a lot of trouble, I don’t mind.”

“But...”

“C’mon, Charles. You need to learn to let other people do you favors. If you keep turning them down, it just hurts you,” I said to her as she let out a sigh. “I know it’s tough to just ask for things out of the blue, but why not get into practice starting with me? This may be going back a bit, but

remember, I'm just like you, especially in family-type things. So feel free."

"Ichika..."

She seemed to toss the idea over in her mind for a while, before accepting that she couldn't eat otherwise and opening her mouth.

"Then, um..."

"Okay. Shall I get you that spoon?"

"Well, uh... Can... Can you feed me?"

She fidgeted hesitantly as she asked—but the unexpected request just melted me. Charles smiled up at me, her jaw open, and asked again.

"You said it was okay to ask for favors..."

"You're right. A man doesn't go back on his word. Okay, let's do that."

It wasn't quite what I'd meant, but at least Charles was asking for something rather than first trying to do it all herself and then giving up. What kind of man would I be if I refused? That smile was kinda unfair, though... Her expression was like an abandoned puppy on a rainy day, begging to be lifted out of its box. Only a hero—or a villain—would be able to refuse, and I didn't want to be either. I took the chopsticks from Charles, and picked up a piece of fish like the ones she'd dropped.

"Okay, say ahh."

"Ahh."

I'd never even dreamed that I'd be hand-feeding Charles, too. As Charles chewed, her cheeks seemed to glow a faint red.

"Is it good?"

"Yeah. It tastes great."

"That's good."

"How about some rice next?"

"Okay."

I picked up a clump of rice, about bite-sized for a girl, and lifted it to her mouth with the saucer under it.

“Ahh.”

“Hm...”

Watching Charles eat was sending my heart racing again. Was this what a bird felt while feeding its hatchlings?

Somehow, I couldn't calm down.

“How about some salad next?”

“Okay.”

I fed her the rest of the meal as our conversation slowed, and after a few words we then each went to bed. Too much had happened today. Exhausted mentally and physically, I fell asleep the moment I hit the sheets.



Darkness. In pitch darkness, a single point.

“.....”

She no longer remembered how long it had been this way, only that her life had been darkness since birth. Humans saw light for the first time when they were born, but she was different. She was raised in darkness, and born in the shadows. And nothing had changed. In an unlit room, embraced by shadows and bathed in gloom, the only light the dim gleam of a ruby-red eye. Laura Bodewig.

She knew it was her name, yet she understood it held no meaning. But there was one exception. When her Lehrerin—when Orimura Chifuyu—called her name, it echoed in her ears. Her heart fluttered.

“Her existence... Her power... It is my goal, my Daseinsberechtigung...”

The single ray of light in her life. The first time they met, she was nearly brought to her knees. With terror. With emotion. With... Joy.

Her heart wavered. Her body burned. And she prayed. Ah, that someday she could be like that. That someday, that could be her. It filled her emptiness. Made her whole. Master of herself. An absolute force. Living perfection. The only one

she could ever identify with. No grime could ever be allowed to besmirch her perfect form.

“Orimura Ichika... You have besmirched mein Lehrerin...”
She could not accept his existence. “I will eliminate him... No matter what it takes.”

Laura closed her eyes, a dark flame growing in her chest. The girl, who was one with the darkness, fell into a dreamless sleep.



“For real?!”

“You’re not lying, are you?”

I was on my way to class Monday morning, and I blinked in surprise at being able to hear the shouts all the way from the bottom of the stairs.

“What?”

“Well?”

Next to me was my roommate, Charles (Male Version).

“It’s true! Like, everyone’s talking about it! The winner of the tournament at the end of the month gets to go on a date with Orimu—”

“A what with me?”

“KYAAA!”

What was up with them? I’d waited until I made it to the classroom and asked in a normal voice, yet all I got back were shrieks of sorrow. How vulgar.

“So, what were you all talking about? I thought I heard my name somewhere in there.”

“Oh? Really?”

“Whatever gave you that idea?”

Rin and Cecilia were trying to laugh it off and change the subject. Was it something I shouldn’t have heard?

“Anyway, I’m heading back to my class.”

“Ah, of course! I should take my own seat as well.”

Each made a swift, if somewhat suspicious, departure.

The rest of the girls gathered seemed to follow suit.

"What was up with that..." I asked Charles.

"Beats me."



—*Why does it have to be like this?*

I sat at my desk near the window as my head swirled with thoughts.

—*The winner of the class tournament gets to go on a date with Orimura Ichika...*

That was for me and him to know! He wouldn't go around telling people that, would he? It must have slipped out some other way.

"....."

Still, now all the other girls knew, and even the upperclasswomen had questions like "But what if the winner's in a different grade?" and "Will they announce it at the ceremony?" This was really, really bad. There was no way I'd approve it if Ichika ended up going out with another girl! But at the same time, trying to keep him all to myself would basically proclaim that we were dating. If only one could live in peace without rumours flying around like wasps...

—*Ah, it'd be nice to have a secret relationship, free of all these problems, and we could—*

"J-Just what am I thinking?!"

It wouldn't hurt to dream a little... But things were complicated now that there were many others in the fray.

Anyway, I just had to win. Winning would solve this entire problem. There was no way I would repeat the same mistake as last time. I couldn't repeat the same mistake... It would all work out in the end. Probably...

—*I can't let it happen again. Not like before, when I made a similar promise...*

Back in fourth grade, I'd participated in the Kendo

Nationals. Even though elementary school entries had been lumped together and I was to compete with fifth and sixth-graders, I was pinned as the favorite due to my upbringing. No else in the competition could match me. Victory was all but ensured, or so I thought... Yet on the day of the competition, I was forced to forfeit because my family had to move—and it was all Tanabe's fault. The IS that Tabane had developed were, even at first announcement, recognized as so overwhelmingly powerful that they would be misused as weapons. To prevent this, our entire family was put into a government protection program. And ever since then, I couldn't stand my sister. I hated her, in fact.

It was all because of her that my life was in utter chaos. We had to move multiple times, and before we could settle down again, we would move again. Despite all that, I'd gotten a letter from Ichika back then, somehow. But because of who I was, I couldn't reply because it was a "threat to our location" if I did.

Eventually I managed to carve out my own existence, after separating myself from my parents, and after my sister had mysteriously vanished. But even then, I was still watched. I never could truly escape the fate forced upon me. The only thing I had to myself was kendo, and I trained long and hard in hopes that one day maybe it would connect Ichika and I again, like before. Yet, even after winning a national title, I felt empty.

I wasn't doing kendo purely because I enjoyed it. It was all I had, and all I could do to fight against my inner demons. Every opponent was a chance to potentially relieve my stress, but no matter what I did, I couldn't shake the feelings that I harbored within me. Seeing the tears of my opponents only made it worse. I slowly came to realize the monster I was becoming. When I was being presented my award, I just wanted to run away. I didn't deserve it. Not in the way I had gotten to that point...

—*What have I been doing with my life...*

That was only violence. That wasn't true strength. True strength is something different. I knew the answer, but I still didn't understand it.

—*Ngh! There I go again, thinking about the past.*

“.....”

I wished it would all just go away. If I won this time, surely things would be different. All the pieces were actually here. I just needed to win.

“I can do this. I will do this... There's no one here that can stop me.”



“Phew. This thing is way too far away.”

There were only three toilets the boys of the school, i.e. me, could use, so the bell that sounded the end of a period was also the starting pistol for a track event. And of course, I had to sprint back to make it in time. Yet lately, I'd received a cruel scolding for running in the halls. What was I supposed to do?

Though really, if I thought about it, it was worse of all for Charles. After all, Charles was really a girl, but she still had to run all the way to the boys' room. Meaning... Actually, I'd rather not. Probably better not to think about that at all. If nothing else, I didn't have the time to waste. My next class was the basics of close-quarters IS combat. Obviously a life-and-death matter for myself.

“And why are you even teaching here?!”

“Sigh...”

Hm? Voices from around the corner caught my attention—naturally, as they were familiar. One was Laura, and one had to be Chifuyu.

“I've told you repeatedly. I have my own duties. That's all I have to say.”

“What duty could possibly bring you to the furthest of the Far East?”

I supposed nothing else could cause the Ice Queen, Laura Bodewig's, voice to rise like that. It seemed like Laura was pouring out her frustrations with Chifuyu's current job, and her admiration for her.

"Please. Please, return to Germany. Your talents are wasted here."

"Oh?"

"Not one of the students here are worthy of an instructor such as you."

"Why?"

"Their wits are slow, their senses dull. They mistake IS for evening gowns. To burden yourself with such trifling nobodies is—"

"That's quite enough, young miss."

Laura let out a grunt, as if punched in the gut. Chifuyu's voice rang as if from above. Even Laura was set aback by her force of will. She stayed silent, unable to continue.

"You've gotten quite full of yourself since we parted. Decided you've already got your position stitched up at age fifteen?"

"I-I..."

I could hear the tremble in her voice even from a distance. Fear, it must have been. The fear of standing before absolute power. And the fear of alienating someone dear.

"Class is about to begin. Get back to your seat."

"....."

Chifuyu's voice returned to normal, and Laura made a swift retreat.

—*Aw, crap...*

"And you, boy. Are you eavesdropping? Being a creep won't earn you any friends."

"Why'd you have to assume the worst, Chifu—"

Bam!

"At school, I'm to be called Ms. Orimura."

"Understood..."

That was the thing. I couldn't poke my head up around Chifuyu, otherwise it would just get smacked right back down. What was this, whack-a-mole?

"Run along now, underachiever. If you don't shape up, you'll be out of the tournament in the first round. No slacking off."

"I know, I know."

"That's good, then." Chifuyu grinned, and it seemed like, just in that moment, she was my sister.

"Anyway, I'll go back to class now."

"Okay. Hurry it up— Oh, and, Orimura."

"Yes?"

"I won't tell you not to run in the halls. But don't get caught doing it."

"Understood."

Chifuyu spun around. It seemed like she was letting me go. I ran back to class, being careful not to get caught.



"Ah—"

Two voices let out a gasp. When: After school. Where: The third arena. Who: Rin and Cecilia.

"What a coincidence. I was just about to practice for the tournament."

"Oh my, what a coincidence. I had the same idea."

Invisible sparks flew between them. It seemed like each was gunning for the championship.

"It seems like a wonderful opportunity to show which of us is the superior—and the most practiced."

"Looks like we agree, for once. One of us must be stronger and more elegant, and now we can find out who."

Each called forth their main weapon, and they stood, staring each other down.

"Then—"

Their voices were drowned out by the crack of supersonic

fire.

“.....?!”

After evasive maneuvers, Rin and Cecilia turned toward the source of the fire. There stood a jet-black IS. Its name, Schwarzer Regen. Its pilot...

“Laura Bodewig...”

Cecilia’s expression hardened into a sneer. Her disgust was more than just that of an EU trial competitor.

“Whatever are you doing? It takes some nerve to simply open fire unannounced.”

With a clang, Rin combined her Souten Gagesu and raised it to her shoulders, preparing to fire in impact cannon mode.

“China’s Shenlong and Britain’s Blue Tears? Hmph, you seemed stronger from the spec sheets.”

Rin and Cecilia both grimaced at the sudden provocation.

“Oh? You’d like to fight? What kind of creep comes all the way from Germany just to get whipped? Or is that what they do for fun down in the potato patches?” Rin jeered.

“Why, Rin! It’s mean to bully someone who’s so uneloquent. Let the bitch whimper.”

Laura’s glare of disdain seemed to have annoyed them quite a bit, and they vented their anger through words. It was probably just wasted effort, though.

“Oh? Are they giving personal assignments to pilots who can’t even take down a mass-produced IS now? You must both be so hard-up for talent. Natural for an empire of swarming ants, and an empire on which the sun has set.”

Snap!

I could hear something crack as both Rin and Cecilia unslung their most powerful weapons.

“Oh, I see. I get it. You wanna scrap, huh. Cecilia! Let’s play rock-paper-scissors to decide who goes first.”

“I suppose. Personally, I’ve no preference.”

“Then why not both of you at once? One-plus-one only equals two. And two mares fighting over the last stud left are

certainly no match for me.”

It was an obvious provocation, but Rin and Cecilia were both well past the limits of their patience.

“What did you just say? Was it ‘come over here and beat my ass’?”

“I’m ashamed as a European Cadet that one of my peers would insult those not even here to defend themselves. I’ll have to teach you a lesson about minding your manners that you won’t forget.”

Each clutched their weapon. Laura stared down coldly at them, spreading her arms slightly, and beckoning with a wave.

“Show me what you’ve got, then.”

“You got it!”



“Are you practicing after school again today, Ichika?” Charles asked.

“Of course. Hm, which one is open today?” I replied.

“The third arena,” came a third voice.

“WHA—”

As Charles and I walked down the hall, an unexpected voice caused us both to yelp in shock. Houki, who had joined us without our noticing, furrowed her brow, perhaps perturbed at our simultaneous response.

“You don’t need to be shocked like that... it’s rude.” said Houki.

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

“I’m sorry. You just surprised me.”

“I... I wasn’t accusing you of anything, just...”

Charles’s proper bow was enough to defuse even Houki’s irritation. As if embarrassed by the apology, Houki cleared her throat and changed the topic.

“Anyway, though. Let’s head to the third arena. I’d heard not many people are using it today. If the airspace is open,

we should be able to get in a mock battle.”

That would be really helpful. An IS’ capabilities were pretty much linked to how long it has been in full operation, so even a little bit of something approximating real combat was something to be grateful for.

We headed toward the arenas, but as we drew closer we became aware of the chaos unfolding inside. There were a lot of students running in the halls, and it seemed like the third arena was at the center of it.

“Huh?”

“Did something happen? Let’s go see what’s going on.”

Charles pointed toward the bleacher gates. I nodded in agreement. We usually entered through the pits, but that was the fastest way to see what was up.

“Someone’s fighting a mock battle. Though it seems more like a real—”

Boom!

“.....?!”

The sudden explosion drew our attention, and we saw shadows flitting through a wall of smoke.

“Rin! Cecilia!”

A special energy field protected the bleachers from the explosion in the ring, but at the same time it meant they couldn’t hear voices from outside. Each was grimacing, staring into the center of the explosion. Within it, we could see the jet-black IS Schwarzer Regen, and its pilot, Laura.

Upon closer inspection, I saw that Rin and Cecilia’s IS were heavily damaged. Never mind just battle damage, pieces of armor had been blown completely off. Laura, likewise, wasn’t untouched, but she seemed to have taken only light damage compared to the other two.

“What are you doing?! Hey!”

Our voices couldn’t be heard, and Rin and Cecilia, after making quick eye contact, turned again toward Laura. Even though it was a two-on-one fight and they should have had the advantage, they were on the back foot.

The impact cannon's invisible bullets shrieked on a path toward Laura—yet, they never arrived.

"Ugh! I can't believe we're this mismatched!"

She must have deployed some sort of barrier. After completely neutralizing the impact cannon with a thrust of her right hand, Laura turned to the attack. Blades mounted on each of her shoulders launched, shooting toward Rin. Connected by wire, they traced a complex arc, weaving around point-defense fire before wrapping around Rin's right leg. It was a weapon combining the capabilities of a dagger and a whip.

"Do you think I'll just let you keep doing as you please?"

Cecilia provided cover fire for Rin. At the same time, her bits deployed, flying toward Laura.

"Hmph. I can't speak for a Blue Tears operated to its potential, but to call this third-generation is laughable."

Cecilia's precise fire was combined with a bit attack from outside Laura's vision. Still, Laura effortlessly dodged it all while extending her arms again. This time, it was left and right at once, crossed over and grasping at something unseen—and as her grip closed, the bits stopped dead.

"You've stopped!" cried Cecilia.

"You, too." said Laura.

Cecilia's aimed shot struck and was canceled out by Laura's cannon fire. As Cecilia prepared to fire another burst, Laura swung Rin, whom she had previously caught, trying to smash Cecilia out of the air. Rin swung like a pendulum in a blunt but effective attack.

"AH!"

As they crashed together and attempted to regain control, Laura charged in. Her speed was like that of a bullet, chewing up the distance between them in barely a second.

"Ignition Boost!"

It was unmistakable. My own special trick, a melee technique. But Rin knew her way around close combat, too. I'd expected her to spin her Souten Gagesu around for a

quick counter, and was shocked when she instead split it. But soon, I realized why. High-temperature plasma blades extended from sleeve-like shrouds on each of Laura's arms, slicing toward Rin from both sides.

"Damn you!"

As Laura pressed forward, Rin attempted to open space, dodging blow after blow. Using the terrain of the arena in her favor, Rin avoided being caught, only to face Laura's wire blades again. Yet this time, she used not only her shoulder blades but pairs attached to either side of her waist, harrying Rin with a three-dimensional attack at the same time as she thrust forth with her plasma blades. Even if Rin was used to close combat, it was too much for her to dodge.

"Ugh!"

Energy again focused as the impact cannons extended.

"How foolish, using a slow area-denial weapon in this situation."

As if to prove herself right, Laura shot at the impact cannons just before they fired, and they exploded in a shower of shrapnel.

"Got you!"

".....!"

With Rin's shoulder armor blown away and her IS falling apart, Laura closed in for a finishing thrust of her plasma blades.





“I won’t let that happen!”

With Laura only a hair’s breadth away from Rin, she used her own Starlight Mk.III as a shield to deflect the blow. At the same time, Rin fired her own waist-mounted missile bits at Laura.

KA-BOOM!

The missiles launched in a close-ranged attack, which she surely knew would engulf them both. The explosion caught Rin and Cecilia, throwing them to the ground.

“What was that supposed to be?”

“Save the complaints for later. Anyway, that should have been enough to—”

Cecilia cut off partway through her sentence.

“.....”

The smoke cleared, revealing Laura. She floated unperturbedly, as if even the brunt of the explosion had left her unscathed.

“Is that all? Then, it’s my turn.”

As she spoke, she swooped downward toward the pair, kicking Rin out of the way as she opened fire on Cecilia from close range. Her wire blades caught each of them in midair, dragging them each toward her. From there, the brutalization began.

“AHHHH!”

Laura’s punches rained down upon their arms, their legs, their bodies. Their shield energy drained swiftly, through the red zone of an IS’ limits, and into the dead zone of risk to the pilot themselves. Eventually their IS would automatically retract, leaving their very lives in danger.

Still, Laura’s assault continued. She continued to punch, to kick, to tear Rin and Cecilia’s IS armor apart. As I watched her normally expressionless face twist into vicious glee, something inside me burst past its limit.

“ARGH!”

I deployed my Byakushiki, taking the Yukihiro Nigata in my hand and focused all my energy into it as I activated

Reiraku Byakuya. Energy flared far beyond the length of its physical blade as I bashed it against the arena's barrier. Reiraku Byakuya pierced it, as it negated almost any kind of energy, and I slipped through the hole it left. At the same time as I entered firing range, I activated Ignition Boost. Using it at the same time as Reiraku Byakuya was at full power may as well have been a banzai charge. Byakushiki was energy-thirsty at the best of times, and with the added consumption, its shields quickly drained. But I had no time to think about that.

"Let go of them!"

I brought my blade down toward Laura, who was still holding Rin and Cecilia.

"Hmph. As emotional as you are simple. The very picture of a fool."

A moment before Reiraku Byakuya's energy struck, my body froze solid. Laura's uncovered eye suddenly turned upward and fixated on me.

"What the— Ugh, my body..."

My body refused to cooperate, as if unseen hands were grasping it. My arms remained raised, and soon, Reiraku Byakuya's energy blade began to fade.

"You're no match for me. Compared to the Schwarzer Regen, you're nothing more than cannon fodder. Now, disappear."

Her shoulder cannon swiveled, and I stared down its barrel.

—*Dammit!*

"Ichika! Get back!"

Charles shouted over a private channel as she unleashed a rain of bullets from akimbo assault rifles.

"Tch. Another nobody."

The unseen force holding me back disappeared, and I regained control of my body. I quickly picked Rin and Cecilia up to carry them away from Laura.

—*Come on, Byakushiki! Just one more Ignition Boost!*

I was almost out of energy, having set everything to full power already. But somehow my prayers were answered, and the thruster on my back roared to life.

—*All right!*

The world slowed to a crawl in front of me, before immediately speeding up. With Ignition Boost's singular stomach twist, we were away from Laura in a moment.

"Are they okay, Ichika?!"

Charles asked as she continued to provide cover fire.

With the assault rifles' fast rate of fire and Charles' own ability to quickly swap them out as they ran short of ammunition, Laura was unable to slip in a counterattack.

"Ugh... Ichika..."

"I'm so humiliated... That you saw me like that..." Cecilia whimpered.

"Don't talk... They're fine, Charles. They're both conscious."

"That's good."

Charles's relief was palpable even as she continued firing. A third change of rifles continues to pelt Laura with bullets.

"Interesting. But now I'll show you the generation gap."

Sometimes dodging, sometimes deflecting, sometimes using her unseen power to stop bullets, Laura crouched, preparing a counterattack. She must have been about to use Ignition Boost, but I was carrying Rin and Cecilia, and couldn't fight. Still, I knew it was too dangerous to leave Charles to her alone.

"Here I go!"

"Ugh!"

In the moment before Laura leapt, a shadow flitted between us.

Clang!

The ringing clash of metal on metal sounded as Laura was stopped by the shadow.

"And this is why I was tired of dealing with kids."

"Chifuyu?!"

The shadow was someone I would never have expected. She was even in her everyday suit, without an IS or even an IS suit. Yet in her hands was an IS close-combat blade, a full 170 centimeters long—nearly my own height—yet being nimbly wielded barehandedly. Casually getting between two IS just made it more obvious that she was no ordinary human.

“I don’t mind mock battles. But as a teacher, I certainly can’t stand by while you even shatter the arena’s barrier. I’m going to have to ask you to finish this at the tournament.”

“As you wish, ma’am.”

Laura nodded as she removes her IS, which evaporated into particles of light.

“Orimura. Dunois. Do I make myself clear?”

“Y-Yeah.”

I was too stunned by everything that had happened to pay attention to my manners.

“Answer your teachers with ‘yes,’ you idiot,” demanded Chifuyu.

“Yes!” I cried.

“I’m fine with that.”

Charles agreed with my corrected answer. Hearing us, Chifuyu turned and announced to everyone in the arena.

“Very well, then. Fighting outside of school hours is absolutely forbidden until the tournament. Dismissed!”

She clapped her hands forcefully. It echoed like a gunshot.



“.....”

“.....”

The nurse’s office. An hour had passed since the incident at the third arena. Rin and Cecilia, wrapped in bandages, were staring off into space glumly as they rested on beds, nursing their bruises.

"You shouldn't have helped us, you know."

"We surely would've won in the end."

And here I was expecting some thanks. Oh well, it wasn't like I helped just for the gratitude. I just couldn't stand to watch something like that unfold.

"Really, you two... Well, I guess it's good that you weren't injured too badly."

"As if this even rises to the level of— Owwww!"

"I don't understand why they're making us lie down—
Nngh..."

—*Idiots...*

"Who are you calling an idiot, idiot?"

"You're the biggest idiot here, Ichika!"

Such cruel counterattacks. I didn't even say it. How did they know? How was one supposed to even deal with two invalids in a temper?

"You two must be embarrassed to lose like that in front of your crush."

"Hm?"

Charles had returned with drinks. She said something while entering the room, but I didn't quite hear. It seemed like Rin and Cecilia definitely had though, as their faces flushed with anger.

"W-W-W-W-What are you even talking about? Ugh, this is why I can't deal with Europeans!"

"N-Not at all! The mere suggestion makes me sick to my stomach!"

The two continue to blush as they scrambled for words. What was that all about? What did Charles say to them?

"Here, one Oolong and one black. Have a drink, it'll calm you down."

"Hmph!"

"If I must."

Rin and Cecilia snatched up the proffered plastic bottles, tore the caps off, and immediately chugged the tea inside. Come on, you shouldn't be drinking cold things so quickly.

“The teacher said you could leave once you calmed down a bit, so why don’t you take a rest and—”

Rumble.

“What was that noise?”

A sound like an earthquake echoed from the hallway. It sounded like it was drawing closer, but that must have just been my imagina—

Boom! The door to the nurse’s office blew open.

It really did. Seriously. That was the first time I’d ever seen a door blow off its hinges. I was amazed it could happen in real life.

“Orimura!”

“Dunois!”

And what entered through it was anything but easy to deal with. A veritable avalanche of dozens of schoolgirls. Even though there was room in the office for five beds, it was packed with people in an instant. Spotting Charles and I, they encircled us, poking their hands out like they were picking through a bargain bin. It was the kind of thing you’d see in a horror movie. An endless sea of hands, hands, hands protruding from a faceless crowd. It was honestly downright terrifying.

“Wh-What’s going on?!”

“What’s wrong? Calm down!”

“THIS!”

The girls slammed down an emergency notice from the school, with an application form attached, before us.

“What’s this?”

“It says that in order to provide a more accurate simulation in next month’s tournament, participants will be organized into teams of two, and that those without a partner will have one randomly assigned. The deadline for submitting your team is—”

“All right, all right! I get it!”

Another blizzard of hands. Oh, man.

“Orimura! Team up with me!”

“Dunois! Let’s team up!”

I didn’t know why they’d suddenly changed the rules of the tournament, but from the looks of things, and their ribbon colors, these girls were all from our year. Apparently they’d worked up the courage to try and snap up one of the only two boys in the school before anyone else did. But...

“Umm...”

Indeed. Charles was really a girl, so it’d be really bad if she was teamed up with any of them. There’d be a lot of duo training, and a lot of opportunities to get caught.

I looked over at Charles, and saw a harried expression flit over her face for a few seconds before she noticed I was looking at her. Our eyes met for a moment, and it seemed like she realized I understood her silent cry for help before averting her eyes. I gave my best self-effacing grimace, before turning to the excited crowd and making an announcement loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Sorry, girls. You may as well give up now, because Charles and I are a team.”

Silence. The sudden stillness gave me a few moments to squirm. This probably wasn’t a good idea, was it?

“Well, that makes sense.”

“It’s better than you going with another girl.”

“Bromance is a thing.”

Looks like they were able to deal with it after all. The girls each mumbled their own acceptance as they filed from the nurse’s office. A lively bustle sounded from the hall as they moved immediately toward setting up Plan B.

“Phew.”

“Uh, Ichika...”

“ICHIKA,” yelled Rin.

“ICHIKA!” shouted Cecilia.

Charles began to speak as I let out a sigh of relief, only to immediately be shouted over as Rin and Cecilia leapt to their feet.

“You should partner with me! We’ve known each other

forever!”

“It’s only natural for two classmates to team up, though.”

Both of them seemed about ready to latch on so hard that they’d strangle me. When you’re hurt, you needed to rest quietly. You’d make your injuries worse if you got worked up. Anyway, though, I wasn’t sure what to do. Unlike the girls from before, these two were obviously in no mood for arguments. All I could do was let out a sigh.

“I’m afraid that won’t be happening.”

Oh?! It seemed like I wasn’t the only one shocked by the sound of another voice. Both Rin and Cecilia blinked in surprise as the new arrival, Ms. Yamada, spoke.

“I’ve checked out your IS, and they’re both damaged beyond Level C. If you don’t focus on their repair, it will cause major problems in the future. Your IS need a rest. You won’t be allowed to participate in the tournament.”

Would these two passionate National Cadets go along with it? I had my doubts, but...

“Ugh... Understood...”

“Under protest! Under the firmest, firmest protest! I withdraw under protest!”

Huh? That was a lot less fuss than I expected. How come?

“I’m glad that you understand, then. Remember, the debts you rack up pushing your IS’ limits will come back to haunt you. The worst thing in the world is when you see a chance and can’t take it. I don’t want that to happen to you.”

“Yes, ma’am...”

“Understood...”

Ms. Yamada’s clear, sober lecture may not have explained everything she hoped it would, but at least it made the duo accept that they wouldn’t be participating in the tournament.

“Ichika, what’s the third basic rule of IS experience?”

It was, uh...

“An IS will independently develop based on experience

accumulated, including through combat. This process continues even if the IS is operated while damaged, and if operated while damaged beyond Level C, will include the function of energy bypasses which will have a negative effect on normal operations,” Charles cut in.

“That’s exactly it! Good work as always, Charles!”

Charles offered up the explanation that failed to spring to mind for me. Essentially, it was like “overexerting yourself with broken bones will, in turn, hurt your muscles.” That pretty much nailed it. Anyway, with that nailed down, I asked Rin and Cecilia the question I’d been wondering for a while.

“Just why were you battling Laura, anyway?”

“Well, um...”

“How shall I put it... It was a question of feminine pride.”

“Huh?”

Why were they so reluctant to answer? Ah well, it was obvious that Laura provoked them, somehow. Still, being National Cadets, they shouldn’t be so eager to take the bait. Yep.

“Oh. Were you fighting over Ichi—”

“Agh! Dunois, you talk too much!”

“Indeed! Far too much! Ohohoho.”

Whatever idea had sprung up in Charles’ mind, they were extremely quick to shut it down. Charles gave a grimace as she was talked over.

“C’mon, knock it off. Look at what you’re doing to Charles. Besides, you two’ve been way too active for how hurt you are.”

In an attempt to slow them down, I poked each of their shoulders.

“BWAH!”

Just like I thought, it must have stung. Each let out a strange scream before falling silent.

“.....”

“.....”

"Oh, sorry. I didn't realize it would hurt so much."

Their silent stares of reproach made it obvious just how much it hurt. Realizing I'd gone too far, I apologized immediately.

"Ichika, you..."

"You'll pay for this later..."

Oops... When they were feeling better, surely some fists of fury would fly my way. Probably a full-cour... a full-course meal. Yeah. And probably dessert would be included, as well. Drinks? Definitely free refills, too.



"Hey, Ichika..."

"Yeah?"

As we arrived back at our room after dinner, Charles opened her mouth. It was a casual phrase, but I could tell there was something behind it. What was up?

"Sorry for not saying this before, but... Thanks for covering for me."

"Huh? What did I do? If anything, you're the one who had my back in the arena."

"Not that. In the nurse's office. I was really happy that you said you were teaming up with me for the tournament."

"Oh, that? Don't even worry about it. I'm the only one who knows about your situation right now, so of course I'd do what I could."

To me it was nothing special, but for Charles it seemed to be different. She was positively glowing with gratitude.

"It's more than that. If you weren't so kind, you'd never have come up with it yourself. I really like people who are willing to speak up to help someone else. It made me very happy."

Well... That was spoken like a true "blond gentleman." Each and every classy choice of words embarrassed me a little bit more. I fanned my cheeks to take away the warmth.

"Anyway... About that. You don't have to force yourself to talk like a guy when I'm the only one around, right?"

"True— you're right. They put me through intensive training before I came here on how to act and speak like a boy so I wouldn't be caught. So it'll probably take a while to adjust back to normal."

Even though I'd never met Charles' father, the part about "putting her through" something made me angry at him, but she treated it like no big deal, so I held myself back. It was important not to mistake anger for someone else's sake for your own anger.

"I mean, I'm not really that girlish, right?" Charles asked timidly, her eyes flitted away from contact.

"Huh? You mean, like how you talk?"

"Yes. I'm not really that girlish, so I'd like to be able to just be myself with you..."

"You just don't need to push yourself, okay? Plus, I don't think that you're not girlish. In fact, I think you're cute."

"C-Cute? Me? Really? Are you sure?"

For some reason, Charles seemed a bit panicked, and she quizzed me intently.

"Of course. Trust me."

"I... I guess. Okay... Fine, then."

I wasn't really sure what was going through her head, but I guess it didn't matter. She nodded again in acceptance.

"Anyway, so much has been going on that we're still in our uniforms. Shall we change?"

That was when it really struck me. Charles was a girl. We didn't really have any choice while putting on our IS suits in the locker room, but at home we had more time and freedom to wander around, so it was probably better if I made myself scarce until she finished. Yeah, definitely a good idea.

"Okay, I'll head out then."

"Eh? Why?"

"I mean, you can't change with me in here, right? Especially with the IS suit involved. I'll just go somewhere

for a while.”

Now that I thought of it, I had the same conversation with Houki. It was kind of awkward living with girls. And Charles presenting herself as a boy made it even worse.

“Oh, no, it’s fine. I don’t want to impose on you like that, and besides... I don’t really mind...”

“You might not, but I kinda do.”

“And... And! It’d be weird if one guy had to leave the room while the other changed, right?”

“Well, you’re right about that. All right... I’ll be in the bathroom. Just tell me when you’re done.”

“I told you, you don’t have to worry about it! Just act normal. And you have to change too, right?”

Well, I guess I didn’t have to leave. I wasn’t really sure why Charles was so insistent, but because of it I couldn’t exactly refuse her.

“All right, I’ll change too, then.”

“Of course.”

A grin rose to Charles’ face. Perhaps because of how passionately she’d been speaking, her cheeks shone a faint crimson.

“All right, guess I should just pull out a t-shirt. Where’d I put those... Oh, there they are.”

“.....”

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

Charles had said it was okay to stay in the room, but for some reason, she wasn’t changing. I watched her, bemused by the contradiction.

“Ichika, I can’t change while you’re staring at me...”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

I spun around. It’s like déjà vu. I could swear I had the same conversation with Hou—

“Okay, I’ll start changing now,” said Charles.

“R-Right.”

I froze up as the sudden announcement interrupted my train of thought. A few moments of silence later, I heard the

sound of her pants sliding down.

—*Oh no... There's that sweet smell again...*

I'd never noticed it when I thought she was a boy, but now that I knew she was a girl, it was like the room was filled with a mild yet bewitching scent whenever we were together. The sweet smell only girls had. What even was that? I'd never noticed a boy smell like that. Was it those pheromones I'd heard of?

"Ichika? Aren't you going to change?"

"Oh, right. Guess I will."

The reminder snapped me out of my haze. I stood up from my bed, and began removing my clothes from the top down.

"....."

Stare.

I could feel eyes burning into my back.

"Charles?"

"Wha— Y-Yes?"

The shock in her voice was enough to surprise even me. And the tremble in her words was enough to make me ask a bit reluctantly.

"Sorry if I'm wrong, but you weren't looking at me, were you?"

"O-Of course not!"

"Oh, good."

A full-throated denial. I guess I was just imagining things. A guy, feeling a stare? That was girlish, even for me.

—*Oh well, let's just finish up.*

"....."

Stare.

Er, Charles? Hello?

"No peeking."

"What?! No, I wasn't, I would nev— Eek!"

Charles' flustered voice changed to a shriek. At the same time, I heard a loud thump, and reflexively turned to see what happened.

"Oww... I got caught on my leg... Eh?"

“Eh?”

“EHHH?”

What met my gaze was Charles, who had tumbled to the floor with her pants around her legs. The problem was how she looked. Her only top was her corset, and below, apart from the pants which had caught on her knee, she was wearing nothing but underwear—not just underwear, but... panties. And when she collapsed, she’d come down on all fours, with her butt sticking out. The light pink panties, bunched up between those firm cheeks, were, how shall I put it, extremely sexy... And that was no good. That was really bad. Especially for me.

“N-No—”

—Oh no! We’d both be in a lot of trouble if someone heard a girl shrieking in here.

Was all I could think about as I bunched up the pants I’d just pulled off and leapt to cover Charles’ mouth with them. This was really enough to make Charles reflexively stop her scream, but by this point I was already diving. There was a brief moment of quiet after she stopped but before inertia carried me on top of her.

There’s a saying: “Everything that can go wrong, will go wrong.” It made sense, making something else go wrong was part of going wrong. As I dove, my pants tangled on a bedpost and got caught. My momentum sapped, I fell straight to the floor.

This all happened in the space of a second. Reflexively, I grabbed something with my outstretched hands—something I really shouldn’t have.

“Mmph!”

My hands felt something supple and springy, yet meaty. Smooth skin below silky fabric. Meaning... I was clutching hold of Charles’ butt. It was soft and warm. At that moment, I understood the calmness of those resigned to death. That sense of universal yearning.

But gravity’s, famously, a harsh mistress. My body

continued fall. Meaning, the panties in my grasp joined me in my continued descent.

“WHAAAA—”

Bam!

Charles had flipped up from all fours, and delivered an instinctive counter. As it hit, my jaw and my head snapped back, and the world faded to black.



“.....”

Charles, after lifting the unconscious Ichika into his bed, changed into her pajamas, her face still red. Her expression was a strange one, mixing anger and embarrassment, and a bit of joy.

“Jeez, Ichika, I never thought you’d be so handsy...”

Understanding that he hadn’t done it intentionally, Charles was still conflicted. If it hadn’t been by accident, it would have been unforgivable, so it still angered her a bit to brush it under the rug.

“If you’d just asked, I would have...”

She began to speak before snapping back to herself. Realizing what she was saying, her face flushed a bright red, and she shook her head.

—*Ugh, I should just go to bed. Yeah! That’s it!*

Turning away from Ichika, Charles put out the lights. It took some time for her vision to adjust to the darkness. She couldn’t quite make out Ichika’s face, yet strangely, it gave her courage.

—*What am I doing...*

Charles thought to herself as she thrust her own face toward Ichika’s. She stared from a distance of not even five centimeters. At this range, she could feel not only his breath, but even his warmth—and she could feel her own pulse quicken.

“.....”

As she gazed at Ichika, her expression turned serious.

“Why not... stay here?”

It was the first time she’d ever heard those words. Since her mother died she had had no place in the world. Her father was kin by blood alone, and she felt as if walled away with ice, suffocating in the meaninglessness of her days. She grew accustomed to an ashen-dull repetition of days, not even daring to dream of a time when she’d be called for. And thus, when her father decreed that she be sent to Japan, she felt nothing.

Yet...

—*Why does Ichika make my heart pound like this?*

Without that, she wouldn’t have met him. The boy in front of her. Sometimes he arrived with what seemed like all the howling of a storm, only to bloom like a spring clover by her side. Yet sometimes, as soon as she stretched out her hand, he fled, darting from tree to tree like a squirrel.

“You’re no fair, Ichika.”

Even as she drew so close, he slept undisturbed. It was just like in *Sleeping Beauty*—and thinking this, Charles began to lose herself.

—*Hehe. We’ve got the roles backwards.*

After gazing at Ichika for a while longer, a look of otherworldly kindness settled over Charles’ face. Like a mother to her child, she bent forward, and lightly kissed his forehead.

“Good night, Ichika...”

With a warmth flowing through her body, Charles settled in for a long, long night.

Chapter IV: Find Out My Mind

It was the final week of June, and IS Academy had turned its full attention to the grade-separated tournament. The excitement was even higher than expected, and as the first round was about to begin, students had been finishing final preparations, setting up the grounds, and guiding guests around campus.

As they were released from duties, they rushed to the locker rooms in the arenas. And, as usual, we two boys had one of the huge locker rooms all to ourselves. How generous. It seemed like the other room had to deal with twice as many girls as it was made for. Must be tough.

"This is really impressive..."

The screens in the locker room showed the stands. They were packed with government functionaries, researchers, industry agents, and more.

"People are here to scout the third years, and see what kind of progress the second years have made. There's not much attention paid to the first years, but they're still likely to check out everyone who ends up high in the rankings."

"Sounds like hard work."

I wasn't really interested or paying attention, but somehow, Charles figured out what was on my mind. She let out a chuckle.

"You're only worried about the match against Bodewig, aren't you, Ichika?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Rin and Cecilia had been forced to drop out of the tournament after their clearance was pulled. This might have been okay for a normal student, but they were each National Cadets with their own IS. Not even being able to

participate, never mind show results, was probably going to cause trouble for them.

"It must suck not even being able to see where you stand."

Recalling that fight, I unthinkingly clenched my left hand. I must have been too obvious, as Charles covered it with her own.

"You can't let your emotions take over. She's probably the strongest in our class right now."

"I know."

Between being paired up in the tournament, and living together in the same room, Charles and I had grown close. It was mostly her understanding what I was thinking or how I felt, but lately I was starting to understand her, too. We had chemistry.

— We were thinking to do things like put out each other's morning tea before we'd even had our own morning tea.

"That was pretty lame, Ichika."

"Ugh... Really?"

Charles was a harsh critic of humor. And for some reason, she'd picked up the ability of my old friends to tell exactly what I was thinking. It was kind of spooky.

"All right, I'm ready."

"Me too."

We had each finished changing into our IS suits. I ran through my final checklist. Charles was in a men's suit too, as usual. Apparently, it was designed to push her girl bulges into places which looked like guy bulges... Anyway, she had just finished up her own checks.

"I think the brackets are about to be announced."

For some reason, the sudden change of format to doubles seemed to have made the usual system malfunction. They were supposed to be announced the day before, but students ended up having to draw them by hand that morning.

"I hope we end up as the first group in Block A."

“Wait, why?”

“We won’t have to stand around worrying that way. Momentum is vital. Best to get off to a running start.”

“Heh, I guess. Personally, I see showing our hand at the beginning as a minus.”

That was definitely a Charles way to look at things. Maybe it was because we looked at things so differently that we got along so well. Or really, maybe it was because she went out of her way to adjust to me. Especially looking at the training we did together, Charles had such a nice personality, and she was kind, too; the type of person I didn’t have around me before. I may be exaggerating a little, but I felt a little compelled to think of her as some kind of goddess or angel. Seriously. Who could blame me?

“Looks like the brackets are up.”

The screens switched over to display the field. I put aside that thought, and focused on the words popping up on screen.

“WHAT?!”

Charles and I each let out a gasp as we read the text. Our first-round opponents were Laura and Houki.



“.....”

In the locker room opposite Ichika’s, there was a rather clear divide between where I was and all the other girls. Beside me was Laura Bodewig... as cold as ever. Just being around her made everyone take a step back. It almost felt cooler, too, contrary to the heat from the overcrowded room we were in.

— *We’re against Ichika first?! What kind of bracket is this?!*

The sudden announcement bothered me a lot, but I tried my best to think about it calmly. When they first announced the doubles format, I ended up losing a lot of sleep because I

wanted to ask *him* to team up. But when I finally went to ask... all I was told was “I’m already teamed up with Charles.”

I didn’t have any sort of alternative to that, so I never sought out a partner afterwards. Before I knew it, the deadline came, and I got assigned one randomly. Out of all the girls in our year, it ended up being Laura. Apparently, we were the only two left that hadn’t found partners.

—I absolutely have to win, and yet...

This was the worst. The absolute worst. While she may be very skilled... I couldn’t stand her. There was no way we would be able to work together. She didn’t listen to anything I had to say at all, and all I got out of her was “Just stay out of my way.”

Despite all this, I could kind of understand her, in a way. She... reminded me of myself, back when I felt like I was better than everyone. And just seeing myself in her almost made me sick to my stomach. But now wasn’t the time to think about that.

—If I don’t focus, I won’t be able to fight with my all. I won’t be able to fight... Ichika.

With my eyes closed, I crossed my arms and began to focus myself.



“I wasn’t expecting us to be up first. Looks like we don’t have to wait around today,” said Laura.

“Yeah, no complaints here. I feel the same,” I commented.

Five seconds left until the match began. Four, three, two, one. Fight.

“I’LL TAKE YOU DOWN!”

Somehow, Laura’s words were the same as mine. As soon as the countdown finished, I open up with Ignition Boost. An opening like this would tilt the battle in our favor.

“RAAAH!”

“Hmph.” Laura thrust her left hand forward.

—*Here it comes.*

My conversation with Rin and Cecilia about their fight with Laura sprang to mind.

“AIC? What’s that?”

“The Schwarzer Regen’s third-generation capability. It stands for Active Inertial Canceller.”

“Huh.”

“Ichika, you know about the PIC, right?” asked Cecilia.

“Not really.”

“Um, Ichika... This is the basics. Each IS has a ‘Passive Inertial Canceller’ that lets it hover, accelerate, and decelerate.”

“Oh, yeah, I think I heard someone mention that.”

“Seriously...”

“All right, that’s quite enough sketch comedy, now let’s think about how to deal with it. Honestly, that was the first time I’d seen it as well, but I can’t imagine that all of the kinks have been worked out yet,” I said.

“Indeed. There’s no way it would outclass an impact cannon like that.”

“And doesn’t it operate on the same principle as the impact cannon? By energizing a field, or whatever.”

“Right. Yes. They’re both pretty similar, then. The details might be different, but it must manipulate energy like an ADWS.”

“Then can’t Reiraku Byakuya cut through it?”

“In theory, yes, but that didn’t exactly happen, did it?”

“You’re right. So what stopped it?”

“It’s simple. It just has to avoid making contact with Reiraku Byakuya, and stop your arm directly, instead.”

“My arm, directly? Can it really be aimed that well from a distance?”

“Apparently. Though, if I may offer my opinion, Ichika. Your movement is...”

"She read you in the large print edition," jeered Rin.

"Oof."

"Your arm always moves in a straight line, right? Like this, either straight down or sidearm? So..."

"Therefore, in combat, she simply needs to cast out the AIC's energy waves along the same line, and allow you to catch yourself." Cecilia said, finishing the thought.

"I see. So what do I do about it?" I asked.

"That's your problem."

"Ain't that the truth..."

In the end, I never did figure out a way, so I had only one option: A surprise attack.

"Ugh!"

However, it seemed like she read my strategy, as first my arms, then my chest, then my legs were caught in the AIC's net. No matter how hard I struggled, I couldn't move at all. Unseen hands grabbed at me, preventing any motion.

"A preemptive strike at the beginning of the match. How predictable."

"You're welcome. I try to be upfront about things."

"Then you should understand what I'm about to do."

Yeah. I had a pretty good picture of what was about to happen, even though I'd have been happier not to.

Click. As the sound of a gigantic revolver's cylinder locking into place echoed, Byakushiki's hypersensors went wild.

*[WARNING: ENEMY IS RAIL CANNON SAFETY
DISENGAGED. ROUND LOADED. LOCK-ON DETECTED.]*

—Calm down. This isn't a one-on-one fight. Right?

"I won't let you do that."

Charles flew over my head, bathing Laura in a hail of high explosive shells from her .61-caliber Garm assault cannon.

"Tch!"

The cannon on her shoulder swung wide under the attack, sending the bullet aimed for me slicing through the sky. As

Charles pressed the attack, Laura darted backward swiftly, trying to open a gap.

"I won't let you get away!"

Charles swung her own gun barrel directly in front of her for a charge, while calling an assault rifle into her left hand. Streaks of light twined together in empty space, forming the gun in less than a second. This was Charles' specialty, the 'Rapid Switch.' Rather than having to prepare weapons in advance, she could swap them in real time. Her dexterity and split-second decision making allowed it to really shine.

"I can't let you forget about me."

Houki appeared in an Uchigane, blocking our pursuit of Laura. Its physical shield, proof of its role as a defensive IS, extended, blocking Charles' bullets as she closed in for a slash.

"And I'll make sure you don't forget about me!" I said.

Having broken free of Laura's AIC, I dove toward Charles' back with Ignition Boost. Just as we crashed together, she made a backward somersault and we swapped places. This combo was the payoff of our hard training.

Clang! I clashed blades with Houki, and sparks flew.

As we traded blows and parries, I increased my thruster output. Slowly but surely, the added momentum behind my strikes pushed Houki back.

"Ugh! Damn you!"

In her frustration at being pushed back, Houki raised her blade in a wide overhead swing. Now was our chance.

"Charles!"

"Got it!"

Ching! I parried with the Yukihiro Nigata held level, braced against my left hand.

At the same moment, Charles, who had been holding onto me from behind, stretched out her hands from under my arms. Each held a .62-caliber 'Rain of Saturday' double-barreled shotgun, designed for suppression fire. At this range, there was no way she could miss. Houki blanched in

fright, but it was too late. Charles pulled the trigger.

“.....?!”

Houki had suddenly disappeared before our eyes. The shotgun blasts fired in vain, finding only air.

—*What?! What just happened?*

“Out of my way.”

Instead, Laura was closing in quickly. One of her wire blades had wrapped around Houki’s leg, and slung her to the far edge of the arena by centrifugal force. It seemed that her emergency evasion was made by the pull of the wire.

“What are you doing?!” Houki yelled.

But Laura was doing anything but helping an ally—she was simply pulling an obstruction out of her way. Houki shouted in wordless rage as she hit the ground, but Laura showed no inclination to listen, as she had already begun her attack on us. Plasma daggers extended, Laura struck repeatedly from the sides. Her unpredictable mix of slashes and thrusts soon pushed me back.

“Looks like the odds are on my side,” Laura sneered.

“Only two?”

If she was that self-confident, Laura Bodewig’s true strength must be positively inhuman. As she continued her attacks on me, Laura used her wire blades to drive Charles back and away from me. Even if she couldn’t fully control all six at once, she was able to rotate between firing and retracting them to carry out an all-range attack.

“You okay, Charles?”

“I should be asking you that. I’ll have cover for you soon.”

“It’s fine. Let’s just stick to the plan.”

“Roger.”

After a short exchange on our private channel, we move to the plan we’d settled on in advance. Essentially, it was “Get Houki first.”

—*I’m sure I’ll get an earful about it later.*

We settled on this for a simple reason. Laura specialized in fighting multiple opponents at once. Meaning, she had no

conception of how to fight alongside others, so she wouldn't lift a finger to help Houki. Therefore, we could take Houki out and then gang up on Laura. As I said before, Laura was more than able to handle multiple opponents, but that was where the trap was set.

—Just because a duo is one plus one doesn't mean that the answer is two.

"Sorry you didn't get to fight Ichika," said Charles.

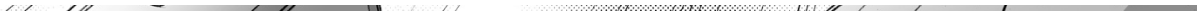
"What? Are you making fun of me?!" shouted Houki.

Charles had escaped Laura's range and was closing in on Houki. I didn't understand why that set Houki off, but set her off it did.

Clang!

Houki's blade parried a slash from the 'Bread Slicer' combat knife which Charles suddenly drew. At the same time, flame erupted from the barrel of the Rain of Saturday in her left hand.





“Ugh!”

As much as I had the mental image of Charles as being good at ranged combat, what she was really good at was being nimble. She was better than average in close quarters as well, even before her Quick Switch. With it, she could fire off a close-ranged blast at an opponent who chose to duel, or dart in for a quick slash at one who tried to gain distance. She could maintain her ideal range and rhythm whether an opponent chose to close in or back away, keeping her offensive and defensive options open.

It seemed that this technique was called ‘Mirage de Désert.’ Or as it was described: “Drawing further as one yearns, and closer as one submits; chasing its azure one’s weariness melts away, as it leads one to a topaz death.” I understood it—kind of.

“Trying to gain a numbers advantage? Pointless.”

Laura, you didn’t even count Houki to begin with. But to us, it mattered. What I needed to do was survive Laura’s attacks until Charles finished off Houki. She fluidly combined plasma dagger thrusts with swipes from her wire blades. Evading them was no simple matter. Still, I did my best to stay in close combat and avoid letting her open up a gap.

“Your only weapon is that blade. If you’re not in close, you won’t be able to touch me at all.”

That was true. But what I was really worried about was that rail cannon. Plus, there were her wire blades, and if she managed to open a gap it’d take a lot of time and energy to close back in.

No matter what, I needed to stick it out! Wielding Yukihiro Nigata in my right hand, I grabbed at one of Laura’s hands, holding one of her plasma daggers—with my left. At the same time, my feet were in constant motion, kicking away her wire blades. As complicated as their motions were, if I didn’t land my kicks squarely on their sides, I’d get a toenail trimming. The second I let my focus down, it would all be

over.

“ARGH!”

Clank! Bam! Bang! Clang!

A high-speed battle at zero range. I didn't know how much longer I could keep my concentration. All I could do was hold fast and believe in Charles.

“Shall we finish this?”

Laura retracted her plasma daggers.

—*Oh no!*

In the same moment, I froze dead in the air. Laura thrust both arms forward, her palms open toward me.

—*Shit! The AIC!*

“Now—disappear.”

Six wire blades sliced towards me at once.

“Dammit!”

I screamed as they carved along my body, tearing off a full third of my IS' armor. Nearly half of my shield energy was depleted at once, too. That wasn't the end of her attacks either, as two wire blades twisted around my right hand, twisting as if to tear it off while slamming me to the ground.

“Ugh!”

I couldn't brace for the shock, and my back slamming into the ground knocked the wind out of me.

—*I need to get back on my feet!*

The thought flashed through my mind at the same time as I watched Laura finish targeting her rail cannon.

“It's over.”

Fshoom!

My vision played out in slow motion. Flames erupted from the barrel, before being torn through by a bullet. Not just any bullet, but one designed to pierce IS armor. It could finish a fight in one shot if it hit its mark. And right now, it was flying straight at me.

—*I'll never get out of the way in time! I have to... cut through it!*

I didn't know whether I could, but I knew that I had to. I

put all my might into my right hand, and—

“.....?!”

—my right hand thudded to a stop. The wire from before must still be attached! Even if it was just one wire, it was tangled with Byakushiki’s gauntlet well enough that I couldn’t get it off quickly.

—*Ah, dammit!*

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

Clang! With a heavy ringing, the bullet clattered off Charles’ shield.

She quickly cut the wire away, freeing my arm. Soon after, a rain of bullets filled where I had fallen.

“Thanks, Charles. You saved me.”

“Anytime.”

“Where’s Houki?”

“Taking a break.”

As she spoke, I followed Charles’ gaze and saw for myself. In a corner of the arena, Houki knelt dejectedly in a heavily-damaged IS with no remaining energy.

“Good work.”

“Let’s save it for after the match, okay?”

Casting away the assault rifles in each hand, Charles drew new weapons. A shotgun and machine gun formed in her hands.

“Here’s where the fun begins.”

“Yeah. Let’s show her how good of a team we make.”



“Wow, that was amazing! I can’t believe they learned to coordinate so well in only two weeks.” In the viewing room reserved for teachers, an impressed Maya watched the battle play out on a monitor. “Orimura’s great. He’s got so much raw talent.”

“Hmph. It’s just because he’s paired up with Dunois. He’d never be able to set something like that up himself,”

Chifuyu, ever-critical of her own family, responded with a wry smile.

“Even so, isn’t it impressive that he was able to follow along with it? Someone completely charmless wouldn’t get anyone to help him like that to begin with.”

“I guess, maybe.”

Chifuyu’s response was sullen, but Maya let it pass, having recently come to the conclusion that that was how she hid her embarrassment. If anything, Chifuyu was proud of her brother.

“By the way, the changes to the tournament format... They’re because of what happened last month, aren’t they?”

The incident of the previous month—the attack by a black IS—had been explained as a plot by an anti-government group. An attack on IS Academy alone was serious, but one conducted by a drone pointed to an even worse situation. The major powers were each suggesting that it may have been perpetrated by their rivals.

“I’m not precisely sure, but it does seem that way. Like the doubles format was to give them more combat experience.”

“The first years have only been here three months, though. It’s not like there’s a war starting or anything. I don’t think they need to be rushed into combat readiness...”

Maya’s concern was understandable. But even as she found herself agreeing, Chifuyu’s expression remained unchanged.

“Remember the incident last month. Many of the new students have third-generation weapons for testing. If another mysterious enemy appears, what should we be most worried about?”

“Oh! So it’s to teach them self-defense?”

“Exactly. As much as the pilots, we absolutely must keep the IS with third-generation weapons safe. And since we’ve only a limited amount of teachers, as a general rule, that means those pilots need to be prepared to defend themselves—thus, the necessity of combat training.”

"I see, I see." Maya nodded, her doubts dispelled.

The disclosure of advances in IS engineering was, in principle, mandated. However, any new technology revealed early in its development would be stolen by other countries, removing the point of its development in the first place. Without a head start in implementational know-how and pilot training, the original developer would, if anything, be left at a disadvantage. This was the purpose of IS Academy. IS Academy was established as an enclave answerable to no legal authority. This, of course, did not mean it was a completely lawless place, but instead was specifically targeted at laws governing IS testing.

"Testing activities necessary for the development of new technology are permitted, and the resulting data will be held autonomously with no duty to disclose."

Meaning, IS Academy was the only place in the world where combat data could be gathered without revealing it to rivals. Thus, China, England, and Germany had each sent IS equipped with third-generation weaponry. And of course, the true objective was the synthesis of one-off abilities. If that three-year period allowed the progression of the IS to second shift, and the creation of a one-off ability using its third-generation weaponry, disclosure would no longer be a problem. After all, one-off abilities were unique.

The chances of success may have been astronomically small, but even without this quantum leap, three years of experience and data would be quite valuable. This, and only this, was why even mere national cadets like IS Academy students were personally issued the newest models. Even if they were among the elites, the key word in the phrase was "among." You could even go so far as to say that anyone of the proper age to attend IS Academy would be good enough. At that age, there wasn't yet a clear gap in skill.

"Yet Shinonono was taken down easily."

"That's what happens without a personal IS. And besides, Shinonono's nature makes her a poor match for Dunois."

Chifuyu compared it to rock-paper-scissors as she turned back to the screen. There, Laura held her own even in a one-on-two fight.

“Bodewig’s quite powerful.”

“Mmm.”

Maya was impressed, but Chifuyu’s voice betrayed her boredom.

“She still hasn’t changed. Still thinks that being strong means doing damage. But she—”

—*Won’t be able to defeat Ichika that way.*

Chifuyu would never say that out loud. She knew exactly what Maya would have said in response.

Wooooow! The crowd erupted in cheers. Their echoes reached all the way to the viewing room.

“Ah! Orimura’s activated Reiraku Byakuya! He must want to finish the fight quickly.”

“Let’s see if he can actually do it.”

“There you go again, acting like you don’t—”

“Ms. Yamada. We haven’t sparred in a while. Let’s make up for it with a good ten rounds.”

“Ah, wait, not right now! I need to, uh, inspect the students’ training IS!”

Chifuyu growled in a low voice at Maya as she frantically shook her head.

“I don’t like being teased about my family. Try not to forget again.”

“Understood... sorry...”

Maya’s expression was one of almost pitiful dejection. Pitiful enough, at least, for Chifuyu to pat her head.

“Anyway, the match is still going. Let’s see how it turns out.”

“Of course.”



“Let’s finish this!”

Activating Reiraku Byakuya, I charged directly at Laura.

"Oh, the attack which can shatter any shield in one touch? I simply have to make sure I'm not hit."

Laura struck repeatedly with her AIC. First her left arm, then her right arm, then her gaze. Somehow, by stopping dead and darting in a different direction, I managed to avoid the unseen blows.

"Annoying as a mosquito."

She began to weave her wire blades into an increasingly brutal attack, but I wasn't alone in my fight.

"Ichika! Two o'clock!"

"Got it!"

My cover fire continued to keep Laura pinned down while deflecting her attacks. I was more and more glad that I'd teamed up with Charles. I didn't know if I'd be able to stand up to that from a foe.

"How impudent!"

Weaving past her wire blades, I closed into range with Laura.

"Useless. I've already read your attack."

"Expecting a slash, huh? Then...!"

I lifted the tip of my blade, which had pointed toward the ground, directly in front of me.

".....?!"

If she expected a slash, I'd attack with a thrust. It may be no harder to read, but at least she'd have more difficulty connecting with my arm. A point is far harder to intercept than a line.

"Absolutely useless!"

My body froze with a snap. The AIC's net had ensnared me completely.

"There's no need to worry about your arm. All I need to do is stop you completely, and—"

"Oh, wait. Aren't you forgetting something? Or did you just not notice to begin with? We're a team."

".....?!"

Laura turned in shock, but it was already too late. Charles fired a swift series of shotgun blasts from zero range. A moment later, Laura's rail cannon exploded with a roar.

"Ugh!"

I was right. Laura's AIC had one fatal flaw. It only held a target in place as long as she focused her attention on it. The grip on me released.

"Ichika!"

"Yeah!"

Again, I raised the Yukihiro Nigata. This time, I wouldn't let her get away!

".....!"

It was an attack sure to take her down. But, instead—

WHIRRRRRrrrrrr...

"Out of energy? Now?!"

The damage I'd taken must have been heavy. I looked down as Reiraku Byakuya's energy blade faded along with its sound, before winking out.

"How unfortunate."

Laura's voice was close. Looking back up, I saw that she had darted in close. Plasma daggers extended from each of her hands.

"You can't fight with your shield energy drained! One more blow, and victory is mine!"

Laura was right. Another blow, and my shield energy would be zero and my defeat assured. In any case, murderous blades swung in from the left and right.

"I won't let that happen!"

"Out of my way!"

Without ceasing her attack, Laura's wire blades sprung forth to hold back Charles. Her swift, precise strikes with both at once drove home the caliber of foe we were up against.

"Wah!"

"Charles! No!"

"You're next! Fall!" shouted Laura.

Charles being hit distracted me for a split second. That was enough time for Laura to catch me firmly.

“Ugh...!”

I felt a scorching heat wash over me as an electric shock pulsed through my muscles. It announced the damage I’d taken more eloquently than any gauge or HUD. Strength left my body, as did Byakushiki, and I fell to the ground.

“Ha... Hahaha! I win!”

As Laura proclaimed her victory, a shadow crashed into her at high speed. It was—

“It’s not over yet!” Charles had accelerated in the blink of an eye.

“What?! Ignition Boost?!”

For the first time, Laura’s face showed dismay. Her briefing probably didn’t mention that Charles could use Ignition Boost. She must be shocked. I certainly understood. I hadn’t known, either.

“That’s the first time I’ve ever done that.”

“How?! You learned it during this battle?!”

Charles’ skillfulness was more than just a character trait, clearly. It was a talent, if not something that could be called a one-off ability.

“Very well. But that’s useless against my stasis field!”

As Laura spoke, she once again readied her AIC. Yet in that moment, the one who stopped dead was—Laura.

Fshoom!

“.....?!”

Laura’s eyes darted around as she hunted for the source of sudden fire from an unexpected angle. Then, she locked eyes with me. I was aiming Charles’ discarded, but still-loaded, assault rifle at her from directly below. The very same one she had unlocked for my use in training. When she discarded it without burning through all its ammunition, I’d realized her backup plan.

After that, I just believed. In myself. And in Charles. And... I suppose we got lucky. Byakushiki had tried its hardest to to

endure one more strike from Laura. I couldn't ask for a better partner.

"You can't use the AIC now!"

"Why do you refuse to die?!" Laura howled, but sure enough, her cold levelheadedness held.

She seemed to have decided to ignore my less-than-precise fire and turn her focus to Charles. Again, she focused her AIC forward.

"But I've found my opening."

"It's useless! My Schwarzer Regen could never fall to a second-generation—"

She began to rant before falling silent. It had sunk in. There was one second-generation weapon renowned for its raw destructive power. One which Charles had carried the whole battle, hidden inside her shield.

"At this range, I can't miss."

An armor panel flew off the shield, revealing a weapon that was a meld between a revolver and a stake. The .69-caliber Gray Scale Pile Bunker. Also known as...

"Shield Pierce!"

For the first time, panic set in on Laura's face. It was quite literally a look of deathly fear.

"AARGH!"

Their voices blurred together. Charles gripped her left hand into a fist and punched forward. Just as I had tried before, she aimed to expose only a single point. But unlike me, she couldn't be stopped in time. Without a pinpoint hit on the pile bunker, it would hit.

".....!"

Laura's eyes narrowed as she found a target—but she missed. For the fleetingest of moments, Charles smiled. It was like the visage of the angel of death, an almost giddily sinful grin.

Bang!

"UAAARGH!"

The pile bunker smashed into Laura's gut. Even though

the IS shield absorbed the blow, it tore through its remaining energy. Laura's face twisted in agony as the shock it couldn't cancel struck her. Still, it wasn't over. The Gray Scale featured a revolving cylinder of explosive charges for quick reloading—meaning, it could shoot in rapid-fire.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

As Charles fired three more times, Laura's body crumpled. Her IS crackled with purple lightning, on the verge of a forced shutdown. But at that very moment, something unheard of occurred.



Have... Have I been beaten?! I have misgauged my foes. This was unquestionably my own error. But still—I will not lose! I cannot lose!

“Laura Bodewig.” That was my name, my identifier. My first identifier was “Genetic Enhancement Experiment C-0037.” Formed from artificial DNA. Born from a steel womb.

Darkness... in pitch darkness, only myself. I was created only to fight—born to fight, raised to fight, trained to fight. I knew only what was necessary to attack another human. I understood only the tactics necessary to deal blows to an enemy force. I practiced martial arts, trained in marksmanship, mastered the use of any and all weaponry. I excelled. My performance was always at the highest level. And then, the ultimate weapon—the IS—appeared, and changed the world.

It was to increase my suitability to pilot that I underwent Wodan-Auge treatment—and then, I began to change. Wodan-Auge: Odin's Eye. The implantation of nanomachines directly into the eye, enhancing motion tracking in high-speed combat and hugely increasing the speed at which visual information is carried to the brain. A pseudo-hypersensor of sorts. An eye so treated is also called Odin's Eye, for its ability to see beyond vision. It was a riskless

procedure. Rejection was impossible—in theory. Yet it turned my left eye gold, and left it uncontrollable and always active. This “accident” led me to fall behind my squadron in IS training. What awaited me, in my fall from greatness, were the sneers and mocking of my squadmates, and a new branding as “useless.”

My world changed. I fell deeper and deeper into a darkness beyond darkness. And then, I saw a ray of light. My trainer, my Lehrerin. Orimura Chifuyu.

“You haven’t been doing well lately, but that’s nothing to worry about. I’ll have you back on top of the squad within a month.”

Her words were true. She didn’t offer me special training, but just by following her instruction closely, I regained my spot at the top of a squad that had shifted to focus exclusively on IS piloting. Still, I wasn’t satisfied. I cared nothing for the squadmates who had pushed me away. Instead, I deeply, passionately, idolized her. Her strength. Her gallantry. Her dignity. Her self-confidence enchanted me. Ah, that someday I could be like that... that, someday, I could be like her.

This was why, for the half-year before she returned to Japan, I spoke with her whenever I could. No, even just staying with her, saying nothing. Just being by her side, gazing at her, I could feel inner strength welling up from deep inside. I suppose this was like “courage.” Perhaps it came from her strength? One day, I asked.

“How are you so strong? How do I become strong?”

And then... her ever-strict expression softened, and a soft, kind smile came over her face. I still remember the pangs it sent through my heart.

“I have a younger brother.”

“A brother?”

“When I look at him, I understand what strength is. What’s needed to be strong.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to, yet. Oh, if you ever visit Japan, you should meet him. But I’ll warn you... If you ever—”

Her kind smile, her mild bashfulness, were...

That wasn’t it. That wasn’t the you I idolized. Not the strong you. Not the gallant you. Not the dignified you. That was why... I couldn’t forgive him. I could never forgive anyone who would bring that look over her face. I wouldn’t accept a brother who would change her like that. Never would I accept him.

So—I must defeat him utterly. Obliterate his very existence with my own strength! So—I couldn’t lose. That man, that thing, still moved. He must be ground down until he stopped. Yes. So—I desired power. Something twisted within me. And a voice spoke.

“What is thine desire? To transform thyself? A greater might?”

I didn’t need to be asked. If you have power, if you could give me power, then fill me, fill this empty shell with it! Grant me power, unmatched power overwhelming!

Damage Level... D.

Mind Condition... Uplift.

Certification... Clear.

Valkyrie Trace System..... boot.



“AHHHHHHHHH!”

Suddenly, Laura screamed as if being torn apart. At the same time, the Schwarzer Regen let off a blast of electricity, blowing Charles away.

“Ugh! What just...?!”

“What?!”

Neither Charles nor I could believe our eyes. In front of us, Laura... Her IS was transforming. No, more than just transforming. The sharp edges of its armor were melting away into a goo, which enveloped Laura’s body. Laura was

swallowed by a pitch-black darkness.





“What is that?” I involuntarily muttered.

Anyone on earth who saw it probably would have said the same thing. As a rule, IS didn’t transform. Strictly speaking, they couldn’t. The only forms an IS could take were its startup fitting, its first shift after adjusting to its pilot, and lastly, second shift—a further adaption. Equipment could change its silhouette to a degree, but its basic form remained unchanged. This kind of thing was impossible.

But, impossible or not, it was happening before our very eyes. And it wasn’t just transforming, it was being remolded like clay. The Schwarzer Regen—the thing which was once the Schwarzer Regen—had swallowed Laura whole, and its swirling mass throbbed like a beating heart as it settled gently to earth. When it landed, its transformation accelerated as if being played in fast forward, and it took on a new shape. What stood before us now was a something in the shape of a black full-armor IS, yet it was completely different from the attacker last month. Its shape matched that of Laura’s body, with the least possible armor on its arms and legs. Its head was covered by a full-visor helmet, and where her eyes would be, a linear sensor emitted a red glow from below armor plating. And the real problem was the weapon held in its hand. There was no mistaking it. It was...

“Yukihira!”

The blade which Chifuyu had once wielded. Its resemblance was uncanny. It didn’t just look like it, it was as if someone had traced over a photo. My grip on the Yukihira Nigata reflexively tightened, as I pointed it forward in the neutral stance.

“.....!”

In the blink of an eye, the black IS dove toward me. Its blade trailed at its hip like that of an iai master, ready to strike in a deadly flash as it closed into undodgeable range. It was, unmistakably, Chifuyu’s technique.

“Ugh!”

I parried with the Yukihiro Nigata. Flowingly, my foe raised her blade over her head.

— *This is... Oh no!*

“.....!”

It fell in a swift, slashing arc. I couldn't parry it. I had no time to parry. Swiftly, I told Byakushiki to dash backwards. It was only by knowing Chifuyu's fighting style that I was able to evade. Still, Byakushiki was too low on shield energy to completely protect me, and blood dripped from my arm where the blade grazed me. The dodge was the last of Byakushiki's power. It disappeared from me in a flash of light.

“So...”

But at that point—I no longer cared.

“So what?!”

Driven my rage, I rushed toward the black IS, to fight it with my own clenched fists.

— *I won't forgive you. Never! Never ever!*

“RAAAAARGH!”

The moment before my fist struck the black IS, I was suddenly pulled backward. It was only when I felt the impact that I noticed what was pulling me back was Houki in a Uchigane.

“You idiot! What are you doing?! Are you trying to get yourself killed?!”

“Let me go! She was playing with me like a toy! I'm going to bash her face in!”

That technique was the first one I'd learned from Chifuyu. I still remembered vividly the first time I'd seen it.

“Listen, Ichika. A sword is made to be swung. But just swinging it isn't fencing.”

The weight of the steel in my hands was almost unbearable, as if it was a test for me. Simply grasping it made my palms sweat, and its weight was too much to lift into a stance.

"It feels heavy, doesn't it? That's the weight of a tool made to take a life."

The blade glimmered coldly. An existence born, created, forged to fight.

"Think about what it means. What it means to carry that weight. That's what strength is."

Chifuyu's face was part-strict, part-gentle. A different expression than usual, as if she was looking at something dazzling. That was why, to be a source of strength for her, I wanted to be stronger. Yeah, ever since that day, I...

"Out of my way, Houki! If you keep trying to stop me—"

"Get a hold of yourself!"

The smack of a full-force slap across the cheek sent me almost flying as I tumbled to the ground. Yet the pain and the coldness of the floor caused my rage, which had hit its peak, to subside.

"What's going on here?! Give me a comprehensible explanation!"

"That... that's Chifuyu's data. It was unmistakably Chifuyu's technique. It could only be Chifuyu's. It's—dammit!"

The black IS stood stock still in the center of the arena. Maybe if it was programmed only to react to weapons and attacks? It seemed like it didn't recognize my fist as one.

"Ugh, you're always so worried about Chifuyu."

"That's not all. I don't like Laura using whatever that is one bit, either. I can't hold back until I take it, and her, down."

Power—strength—wasn't just about doing damage. That wasn't true strength. It was just brutish violence.

"Anyway, I need to give it a good beating. But I need to calm down first."

"I understand your motivation, but what can you do? Byakushiki has no energy left. How do you intend to keep fighting?"

“Ugh...”

Houki was right. The black IS must not have much energy left, but still, that didn't matter if I couldn't hit it with something. And nevermind an attack, Byakushiki didn't even have enough energy left to form its armor.

“Emergency! Emergency! All tournament matches have been canceled. Alert Level: D. All teacher squadrons deploy for suppression. Spectators are ordered to take shelter immediately. I repeat—” blared over the intercom.

“You heard her. This'll be taken care of even if you don't do anything. So...”

“So there's no reason to throw myself into danger?”

“Exactly.”

Houki was correct. Her reasoning was sound. But I—refused.

“That's wrong, Houki. Completely wrong. It isn't something I think I have to do. It's something I want to do. I don't know what anyone else is doing, and I don't care. If I don't do this, I'm not me anymore. I'm not Orimura Ichika.”

“You moron! What are you planning on doing, then?! How are you even going to get ener—”

“If you have none, you'll need to borrow someone else's. Right, Ichika?”

“Charles...”

Charles had recovered from the blast, and drifted back toward me.

“Normal IS can't, but I think my Revive can transfer energy through core bypass.”

“Really? Please, then! As fast as you can!”

“But!”

Charles poked a finger at me. For once, she was insistent, in a way that brooked no argument.

“But promise me. Promise me you won't lose.”

“Of course. I'll tell you this. If I lose, I won't be able to call myself a man.”

“So if you lose, starting tomorrow you'll be wearing a

girls' uniform," jeered Charles.

"Ugh... All right. Not like I'm gonna lose anyway!"

The joke took a bit of the tension out of the air. The blood that had rushed to my head receded, and I cooled off.

"Anyway, here I go. Initiating Revive core bypass... Energy transfer authorized. Ichika, set Byakushiki's mode to emergency power! That should give you enough for Reiraku Byakuya."

"Got it!"

A cable snaked out from the Revive and attached to the gauntlet that Byakushiki had shrunk to, and energy began to flow. The power rapidly welled up inside me. Feeling it gave me a strange sensation. This is the same feeling as the first time I used an IS... One nostalgic and familiar, as if I'd known it forever. Yet one as fresh as if the world was reborn around me, as if I could sense everything around me.

"....."

—I'll worry about what that is later. There's something right in front of me that I need to take care of first!

"Transfer complete. I've sent you all the Revive's remaining energy."

As if in agreement, the Revive streamed into light around her. At the same time, I began to manifest the Byakushiki around me in emergency power mode.

"I was right, there's only enough for a weapon and your right arm."

"That's all I need."

Byakushiki understood that I would use Reiraku Byakuya, and formed only Yukihiro Nigata, as well as the right gauntlet I needed to wield it. No armor. A single hit would kill me instantly—leave me maimed—if I was extremely lucky. But it set the table with just enough for me to serve up one of my own. The rest was all up to me.

"Ichika!"

Houki, who'd been watching from the side, opened her mouth as if she couldn't stay silent any longer. Gazing at

me, she spoke with grave seriousness.

“Don’t die... You can’t die!”

“What are you worried about, stupid?”

“Who are you calling stupid?! I—”

“Believe in me.”

“Eh?”

“Believe in me, Houki. Don’t worry. Don’t pray. Just believe in me. I’ll win. And I’ll come back alive.”

—I won’t mistake what strength is again. I know what strength that doesn’t need power is. I know someone who’s stayed strong to protect someone better than anyone. So... So I want to be strong like that.

“It’s go time.”

“Ah! Win, Ichika!”

Having promised victory to Houki, I squared off with my foe. A quick glance over at Charles was answered with a single, wordless nod. That was all I needed.

“Here I go, you imposter.”

The blade of the Yukihiro Nigata in my right hand sensed my will and split apart.

“Reiraku Byakuya... Activate.”

Its soft hum was like a spoken answer. The blade with the power to pierce any energy sprung forth, twice as long as the metal one it replaced. Length didn’t matter this time. What mattered was speed and sharpness. An elegant blade which could be wielded swiftly.

I focused my thoughts, imagining a beam of light in the darkness. Imagining it growing thinner, sharper, more tapered. As my focus solidified, Yukihiro’s transformation was complete. The blade of Reiraku Byakuya, which had been an eruption of energy, had coalesced in a short and sharp form. The physical blade of the Yukihiro which gave it form had disappeared, and above the grip all that was left was Reiraku Byakuya in the shape of a katana.

—Thank you, Byakushiki. Let’s do this!

I held it at my side, closing on the black IS in an iai

stance. The Issen Nidan, formed from Chifuyu's teaching and Houki's example.

"Use the weight of the blade to your advantage. Don't treat it as something you're holding. Treat it as an extension of your own body. Move with no wasted effort, no openings, and no carelessness."

"Why don't you get it? Just watch, I'll show you how to do it!"

They merged together in my mind. From them, I created my own stance. With hips lowered, I brought the hand holding my blade toward my back. My eyes stared directly forward, and my heart filled with the image of an absolutely still, mirror-like pool of water. Preparing myself to react to anything, I focused my senses on a single point—the enemy in front of me.

"....."

The black IS' blade swung down. Just like Chifuyu's, it was a swift, sharp over-the-shoulder slash. But what it lacked was Chifuyu's determination. It was...

"Just an imitation!"

Clang! A sideways slash upward from my hip parried my foe's blade.

Immediately I brought my own over my head, and swung it straight downward. Issen Nidan. First a flash, then a slash. And a crackle. The black IS was wracked with purple lightning as it split in half. And, for the moment before she lost consciousness, Laura and I locked gazes. With her eyepatch gone, her golden left eye was laid bare. It stared at me with the weakness of an abandoned puppy, as if begging me to help her.

"Okay, maybe I won't bash your face in."

As I held her up to keep her from collapsing, I whispered to her. Whether Laura heard it or not, only she knew.



"I'll warn you. If you ever meet him, be careful. He may seem oblivious, but he's a real charmer. Let your guard down and you'll fall for him in no time flat."

She had warned me with a disgusting amount of glee and a bit of embarrassment that left me irritated. But now I knew. That was just jealousy. A little later, I asked.

"And did you, too?"

"A sister falling for her brother? What kind of idiot are you?"

Her cheeky grin left me even more concerned. The man who could give her such an expression... I envied him. And... When we met, I knew. When we fought, I truly understood. What was strength? There were as many answers as answerers. But only one which I met so intensely.

"Strength... It's something in your heart. Something which forms your core. I think it has to be something that you constantly try to be."

Really?

"Of course. If you don't know what you want to be, forget strong or weak, you don't even know how to walk."

How to... walk...

"It's where you look to. It's why you look there."

Why... you look there...

"Basically, if you do what you want, you win. Don't hold yourself back or get caught up in worries."

He—that man—spoke with a grin.

"If you're not doing what you want, it's not even living."

—*Then what about you? Why do you want to be stronger? What gives you strength?*

"I'm not strong. At least, I don't think I am," he insisted.

It left me at a loss for words. He was so powerful. Why would he say he wasn't strong? I couldn't understand.

"But if I am, it's because..."

—*Because?*

"Because I want to be strong."

.....

"Because there's something I want to do when I'm strong."

—*Something you want to do?*

"I want to protect someone. I want to give my whole self over to fighting to protect someone."

He was just like... Just like her.

"Yeah. So I'll protect you, too, Laura Bodewig."

As he spoke, my chest pounded for the first time.

"I'll protect you."

—*Hearing his words, I... This must be that.*

My mind soared.

My heart throbbed. Next to him, I was only a fifteen-year-old. Only a woman.

Orimura Ichika...

She was right. I'd fallen for him.



"Ugh..."

Laura opened her eyes to a light from above.

"Are you awake now?"

A familiar voice. And not just familiar. A voice which she could place in a heartbeat. Her beloved Lehrerin, Orimura Chifuyu.

"I...?"

"You put too much strain on yourself. Fatigue and bruises all over. You won't be able to move around for a while. Don't force yourself."

Chifuyu tried to brush it off and change the topic, but it was still her old student. Laura couldn't be distracted that easily.

"What... what happened?"

Laura tried to force herself upright, grimacing at the pain

which rippled through her body. However, her eyes still fixated on Chifuyu. Her eyepatch had been removed while she was being treated, revealing a left eye which was golden in contrast to her ruby-red right. Different colors or not, they shared an inquisitive gaze.

“Hmm. This is a serious matter, and one which is to be kept confidential.”

Still, she understood that Laura wouldn't be put off so easily. After a silence to underscore that this was meant to be kept between the two, she formed her words slowly.

“Do you know about the VT System?”

“Yes... The Valkyrie Trace System... It traces the motions of previous Valkyries—Mondo Grosso event winners—but...”

“Correct, any research, development, or usage by any nation, organization, or company is forbidden by the IS treaty. But it's equipped on your IS.”

“.....”

“It was hidden well. It took your own mental state, the IS' damage, and most importantly your own will... No, your desires. With all three in place, it activated. The academy is currently questioning the Bundeswehr about it. There'll likely be a compulsory investigation soon.”

Listening to Chifuyu, Laura gripped the sheets tightly. Her gaze drifted downward, to the void below her eyes.

“It's because I wished for that, isn't it?”

—*To be you.*

She didn't say it, but Chifuyu understood.

“Laura Bodewig!”

“Ma'am!”

The shock of hearing her full name made Laura turn her face up.

“Who are you?”

“I-I... I... I'm...”

She couldn't finish her sentence. In her current state, she couldn't even call herself Laura.

“No one, then? That's a good opportunity. From now on,

you can be Laura Bodewig. You've got plenty of time. You're going to be at this school for three years. After that, I guess you've got until you die. Think hard about how you're going to use it, young miss."

"Ah..."

Chifuyu's words surprised her. Laura wasn't expecting the encouragement, and had no idea how to respond. Instead, she sat, her mouth agape, at a loss for words.

Chifuyu stood and stepped away from the bed. It seemed she'd said what she needed to say, and was returning to the world of teaching.

"Oh, one more thing." With a hand on the door, she turned back and spoke again. "You can't be me. Being his big sister is a never-ending stress."

That was a grin, wasn't it? Laura understood it as such. A few minutes after Chifuyu left, her mood suddenly changed.

"Ha, haha... Hahaha!"

—*What a pair of cheaters.*

The brother and the sister both disappeared as soon as they'd said what they wanted. Talking about herself, after all. That was the absolute peak of it.

—*Think as myself, act as myself, huh...*

Twinges of pain greeted each laugh which leaked out, but still, deep inside, Laura felt joy. Defeat. Absolute failure. Yet, it still felt unbearably good. Yes, for Laura Bodewig, this was just the beginning.



"—as a result, the tournament has been canceled. However, all first-round matches will be played out to facilitate the gathering of tracking data. Please check your new time and location from your compu—"

The TV in the cafeteria beeped as someone switched it off. I'd been watching out of the corner of my eye as I worked through my seafood shio ramen, and it felt like

something was slipping away. Rather... The noodles were, at least.

"Hmm. Looks like you were right, Charles."

"Yeah. Oh, Ichika, could you pass the shichimi?"

"Here."

"Thanks."

You could criticize us for being so relaxed after the events of the day, but the truth of the matter was, the teachers had just finally finished debriefing us. By the time we were let go, we barely had enough time to make it to the cafeteria before closing. And as we rushed in, we were greeted by a crowd of girls who must have wanted to hear the story directly. We thought it'd be best to get our dinner out of the way first, and went straight for our table, but then a chyron came up on the TV that an important announcement was coming, and that was apparently it.

"That really hit the spot. The food here's great at the cafeteria and in the dorm kitchens— Hm?"

I wasn't quite sure why, but suddenly all the girls who'd been waiting to talk to us after we finished seemed deeply disappointed. Their spirits seemed as sunk as the battleship Yamato—not that I'd actually seen it go down.

"Championship... Chance... Gone..." bewailed one of the girls.

"Date... Canceled..."

"WAAHH!"

The patter of dozens of feet could be heard as they fled crying. What was that all about?

"What's up with them?"

"Beats me."

Charles and I were nonplussed. It was just another example of how girls didn't make any sense.

"....."

After the group had left, I noticed one other figure stood up, as if in a daze; it was my childhood friend, Houki. She looked as if her soul had floated straight out of her body, so I

went up to her to see what was wrong.

“Hey, Houki. About that promise last month—”

“Bwah!”

Well, that was quite a response. I guess she wasn’t dead just yet.

“I wouldn’t mind going out with you.”

“.....What?”

“I said, I wouldn’t mind going out with you... Wha?!”

She bounded like a spring, wrapping her arms around my neck effortlessly, even though I was taller.

—*What in the...*

“R-Really? Like, really, really, for real, really?!” She asked, over and over.

—*Keep asking like that, and it will be a prank...! As if.*

“Of course.”

“But why now? At least tell me why...”

Houki suddenly retreated, crossing her arms as she cleared her throat. I wondered why her face was so red. Ah, well.

“It’s a promise with a childhood friend, right? So yeah, let’s go out.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, we can go out shopping or something anytime.”

“.....”

Houki’s expression hardened in an instant. So, this was what they based demon masks on.

“I knew it...”

“Huh?”

It was best not to prod Houki too much when she had that kind of expression. She was like nitroglycerin, or your stomach after too many chili peppers—best treated with a delicate, soft—soft-serve?—touch.

“I knew it was something like that!”

Bam!

“Oof!”

A straight punch with all her weight thrown into it. For a

moment, my vision dimmed. It was like getting hit by a *cannon*.

“Hmph!”

Urk... With a kick, her toes buried themselves in my solar plexus.

—*You idiot, you’re flashing your panties... They’re oh so white.*

“Ugh...”

Houki stalked off—I was too busy collapsing to see where to. I’d taken some serious damage. I didn’t want to move for a while. I couldn’t move for a while.

“Sometimes I think you do things like that on purpose, Ichika.”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, whatever.”

Charles avoided eye contact a bit huffily. What was with that reaction? It took me a full 15 minutes to finally recover. Rubbing my still-aching gut, I sat down across from Charles.

“By the way, there’s something I wanted to ask you.”

“Sure, what? Ask away.”

Charles had finished her tsukimi udon, and looked up with a grin. After everything that had happened between the match and now, I was amazed that she was able to stay in such a good mood.

“Can people communicate through their IS? Like, not just over a private channel, but as if they’re whisked off into a separate dimension?” I asked.

“Huh? Actually, I think I’ve heard of something like that. They say it’s just because of the networking between the IS, but sometimes pilots who’re on the same wavelength report sharing thoughts with each other. Is that what you mean?”

“That’s exactly it! Same wavelength, though... I’m not sure I understand that.”

“There’s a lot about IS and their abilities that no one understands. Their inventor, Professor Shinonono, disappeared without even telling us everything she knew

about them, and I think even before that she'd said in an interview that she'd built parts of them to self-evolve so even she didn't really know."

"That's definitely something Tabane would do..."

Tabane didn't care about anything other than what she was focused on at that very moment. She probably could have figured it out, but I think she was just slacking. As I thought about that, I realized that Charles was looking at me. It may have just been my imagination, but it seemed more like a glare than anything.

"Ichika, this separate dimension of yours... was it with Bodewig?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Mhm... thought so."

Charles acted nonchalant as she went to return her dishes, but from our training together, and our unspoken communication as a duo, I realized her mood had suddenly turned. Even though she tried her best not to show it, it was obvious in the hardening of her tone and her increased pace. Still, what set her off? Truly, it was a mystery.

"Oh, there you are, Orimura, Dunois. You held up well earlier."

"You too, Ms. Yamada. Aren't your hands tired from writing down everything?"

"No, no. I've always been good at little things like that. No need to worry about me. I am a teacher, after all."

Ms. Yamada puffed out her chest with a self-satisfied chuckle. Again, those voluptuous mounds bounced. Not knowing where to look, I instinctively looked away.

"....."

"Ichika, you pervert..." The whisper was quiet, but I heard it clearly.

"Huh? Hey, wait, Charles! It isn't like that."

"Hmph. If you say so."

Ugh, what had her so mad? Didn't she like her udon? I guess I was the one who told her the traditional way was to

slurp down the egg yolk last, but...

"Huh? Is something the matter?"

"No, no! Nothing at all."

"Oh, good. Anyway, I have some good news!"

Ms. Yamada pumped both fists. Again, her breasts bounced. Come on... I mean, I liked to watch it, but I didn't want to watch it.

"Finally! Boys can finally take baths!"

"Ohh! Really? I thought it wouldn't be until next month."

"Well, as it turns out, today we had someone inspecting the boiler, so it was supposed to be closed all day. But that's all wrapped up, so I thought, why not let the boys in?"

Incredible! Amazing! Wonderful! With everything that had happened with the tournament, I just wanted to relax and let my worries float away. Honestly. Every single match I was in, even the class league the month before, something crazy and unexpected happened. At this point, I was batting 1.000. Not a number I was proud of.

"Thank you so much, Ms. Yamada!"

Overflowing with gratitude, I grasped her hands. With her hands in mine, I gazed at Ms. Yamada, my eyes shining as if painted with glitter. Ah, baths were so wonderful! They were a part of Japanese culture, tradition, I'd say even the very Japanese spirit itself!

"If you get much closer, I may not—"

"Hm?"

"Ah, wait! It's nothing! Nothing at all!"

Somehow, Ms. Yamada's gaze flitted around as if she couldn't control her emotions. Wasn't she the one who told me to look people in the eye? And for some reason, her face was red. Did she have a cold? Colds during the rainy season really took a lot out of a person. I wish she'd take better care of herself.

"Ahem!"

Charles cleared her throat, as if to provide punctuation. The temperature of her gaze seemed to have dropped a few

degrees. I wonder why? Wasn't she happy about the baths? I sure was!

"A-Anyway, go ahead and take a bath, you two. You must be exhausted from that game of twenty questions."

"All right! It's off to the—erm."

As I answered enthusiastically, I realized something. Ms. Yamada's exact wording of: "Go ahead and take a bath, you two." 'You two.' Meaning, me and Charles. Oh no. Oh, no, no, no. Charles was still passing as a boy. It'd be really weird if we went separately, after how big of a deal it was. I couldn't imagine flaunting it like that would be appreciated.

"U-Umm..."

"What's wrong? Hurry up and go get something to change into. I have the key to the baths, so I'll be waiting for you in front of the locker room. See you there!" Ms. Yamada walked off briskly.

Ahh, what could we do about this?

"Charles..."

"Yeah. This is a problem. What are we going to do? Let's figure it out while we get clean clothes from our room."

"Okay. I just hope we think of something..."

We were on the same page—or it was just really obvious. Anyway, Charles and I returned to our room. Nothing came to mind while getting clothes, but at the same time, we were too stressed for idle chatter, so we just silently got ready for our bath. And then...

"Oh, there you are. Well, here you go! The water's nice and hot!"

"T-Thanks."

With a final "Enjoy yourselves!" Ms. Yamada left, shutting the locker room door behind her. For a while, we sat in silence, back-to-back in the locker room.

"....."

"....."

Oh no. This wasn't good. I really wanted to take a bath, but I couldn't with Charles. First of all... Well, I'd seen her

naked before, but that was different. I shouldn't even need to say this, but girls of a certain age shouldn't be showing that much skin to men. And at the same time, I absolutely had to avoid seeing naked girls. A lot of people would say "no harm, no foul," but they're wrong. It's a huge mistake. Only an idiot would think that. There was, in fact, harm. Harm to the girl's dignity, to her propriety, to her value. It was a man's place to protect women, not to degrade them. I may not be Houki, but sometimes I could expect people to be ashamed of themselves, too.

"Err... Charles?"

"Y-Yes?"

Why so polite all of a sudden? Ah well, whatever. We should just talk face-to-face. It was amazing how many words you couldn't say while facing away from each other, but could while looking each other in the eye.

"You must be worn out from today. Take your bath. I'll kill some time in the locker room for a while, then head back to our room."

"Wait, what about you, Ichika?"

"It's not like we can take a bath together. So if it's gonna be like that, you may as well enjoy yourself. I'll just shower."

Men grin and bear it. I didn't even mind, if it was for my partner Charles. I wasn't about to do the same for someone I'd never met, but I owed her a lot. Nowadays, it wasn't unusual for girls to just ask random men for things, and that I had no interest in. It didn't matter who you were, if you were just going to be rude and demand things, I had no reason to pay any attention to you. But flipped the other way around, if you had a good reason for what you wanted, I'd do anything to make it happen. It may not be obvious, but I was great around the house, and even good at massages. Chifuyu could vouch for that. Not to brag, but I'd probably make a great househusband. Ehehe.

"Nah, I'm fine. If we're going to do that, I should wait in the locker room. I'm not that big of a fan of baths anyway,

but you like them, right?”

“Yeah!”

—*Of course I do!*

If I had to choose between eating and bathing, I’d put my checkmark next to bathing on the ballot. Maybe if you combined eating and cooking it would be a different— Huh? Why was Charles’ face so red?

“Is something wrong?”

“Nothing! Just go and take your bath! Don’t worry about me, okay?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“All right, then! Thanks, Charles! I owe you one!”

Arguing with her when she insisted that much would be impolite. Besides, I was excited. My first bath in forever—and not only that, but the place was huge! I made my way out of Charles’ line of sight, and stripped out of my clothes. It wasn’t just the IS suit, mens’ clothes were so easy to take off. I wasn’t kidding when I said I could be naked in half the time it took me to get dressed.

“I’m getting in now.”

“Okay. Just chill.”

I wasn’t quite sure about that response. Was she going to prank me or something? No way.

“Whoa!”

It was huge! Gigantic! There was a large bath, two medium-sized jacuzzis, and a wooden bathtub. Not just that, though. It had a sauna, showers all around, and even a waterfall! Everything I could ask for!

—*I’m so glad I was born Japanese! And I’m so glad I go to a school funded by the national government!*

I was so hyped up. I could use anything in here as much as I wanted. What Japanese person—what human being—wouldn’t be excited?

“Wait, get a hold of yourself. Diving into things never pays off. I need to shower first.”

—*Hahahah, “diving” into things.*

“Woohoo!”

I could even yell! After all, it was a big room! (Warning: Do not try this at home.) Still holding back my enthusiasm, I ran water over myself and began to scrub with body wash. First a shower, then a soak, then another shower, then another soak—and, done. That was how I bathed. It wasn’t a hard and fast rule, but it made me enjoy baths more, so it was how I did it. After I washed off, I sunk into the large bath I’d been looking forward to.

“Haaah...”

A feeling of relief spread across my body. The emptying-out of all my exhaustion and stiffness melting away. The blanket-like pressure and relaxation of the warmth. I let them wash over me, thinking of nothing, simply enjoying the bath.

“Ahh, I feel alive again...”

Again... Again... Again...

This was the real deal. Even the echoes were beautiful. It had everything I expected from a bath. I’d have to give it five stars. I lost track of time as I soaked, and soon I began to feel sleepy. Maybe it was because I was so exhausted, but as the relaxation continued, I began to doze off.

—*Ahh, I wish I could just fall asleep...*

I’d probably drown if I did. That wouldn’t be good.

Rattle.

—*Huh? Am I imagining things, or did the door to the locker room just open?*

I wasn’t really thinking clearly. I couldn’t reject the idea that I was just hearing things.

Splish, splash, splish.

I heard the sound of two beautiful legs walking on the wet tile. I could tell they were beautiful because the sound was beautiful. If they made a beautiful sound, they were probably beautiful. Ah—

“I’m getting in.”

“.....?!”

Even though my face was half-submerged, I rocketed upright. What appeared from the steam was a bare-naked Charles. Of course, she was wrapped in a towel, but it was only a thin sports towel. It was transparent enough to let through the color of her skin. And with the light behind her, I could clearly see her every curve.

“Wh-What?!”

“Don’t stare... Ichika, you pervert.”

“Sorry!”

Ah, why was I apologizing? I didn’t know! I didn’t know, but I apologized anyway, and immediately turned around. It was a reflexive spin as fast as an IS’. The human body was amazing.

“W-Why?! What are you doing in here? I mean, obviously, you’re taking a bath, but that could have waited until I was out— Why are you in here now?”

This was bad. My mind was racing. Even though I realized it, I couldn’t get a hold of myself.

—What am I supposed to do about this? Wait for someone else to solve it? Just melt? I hope I’m not soaking in solvent.

“Do you not want me here?”

“That’s not it, just...”

I mean, I didn’t mind. It was just awkward. Very awkward. I was a healthy 15 year old boy who was interested in the opposite sex just like anyone else, and I couldn’t say it was purely platonic. And here I was, alone in this huge bath—it even had steam and echoes—with a naked girl. That wasn’t good. At least, I didn’t think it was. I could hear Charles’ breath from behind me, and my heart raced.

“I thought I’d try it out. If it’s bothering you, I can leave.”

“No, no, no. If someone leaves, it should be me. I’ve already had my turn, and you—”

“W-Wait!” Her sudden shout shocked me into silence.

“Plus, I wanted to talk. There’s something important I wanted to ask you.”

“Okay.”

If it was important, I had to listen. I settled my hips back below the water, but I couldn’t look at Charles. I turned right in the bath, tilting an ear toward her.

“It’s about what we talked about before.”

“What we talked about before... You mean, about you staying here?”

“Yes, that. I think I will stay here. I don’t have anywhere else to go, and besides...”

“And besides?”

“.....”

I was answered with silence. Our conversation stopped, and a stillness fell over the bath.

Plop.

“Eek!”

“W-What’s wrong?!”

Her sudden, though cute, scream led me to respond in surprise as well.

“A drop of water landed on me. It scared me.”

“O-Oh?”

“.....”

“.....”

The silence continued. For some reason, the drops of water from the ceiling seemed more intense than usual.

Splash...

“Huh? Charles?”

Hearing the splash, I reflexively turned to see where it came from.

“D-Don’t look! Turn around!”

“Sorry!”

Even with the steam obscuring things, she was less than a meter away. It seemed like Charles was approaching me.

—What is she doing? Ugh, the rush of blood to my head is keeping me from thinking straight.

Yet in the next moment, all the consciousness that had flowed out of me leapt back into my head. Charles’ hand

clapped on my back.



“Charl—?!”

Her arms worked their way around me in an embrace. The feeling of her slender body against mine sent my heart leaping into my mouth.

“It’s because you said I should stay here. If you’re here with me, I want to be here.”

“I see...”

I didn’t really understand why it was a big deal, but if it helped her, I was happy. Other people around me had done the same for me, so I wanted to do it for someone else. Because I was protected so kindly, I wanted to be kind to others and protect them, even just a little bit. That was how I felt.

“And... There’s one other thing I’ve decided.”

“One other thing?”

“Yes. How to be myself. You’re the one who showed me how.”

“Did I?”

“Yeah, you did. Hehe, sometimes you’re so dense. It’s annoying.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I forgive you. But can you call me Charlotte from now on? At least, when we’re alone?”

“Is that your real...”

“Yes. My real name. The name my mother gave me.”

“Okay... Charlotte...”

“Mm...” Charles—no, Charlotte—replied happily. I imagined her almost childishly innocent smile.

“Anyway, uh. If you keep holding onto me like that, bad things are going to happen...”

I had finally noticed the feeling of those mounds not just resting on my back, but pressing into it. They may not have been exceptionally large, but they were more than supple enou— No, just ignore it!

“Ahh, oh, right! I’ll go wash my hair now!”

It seemed Charlotte had also realized what was

happening, as I heard her splash away before getting out of the bath.

“No peeking, okay?”

“Of course I wouldn’t.”

“You were supposed to peek...”

It sounded almost like she replied to me, but I couldn’t quite hear it over the splashing. After that, Charlotte and I each took a second turn in the bath, leaving after 30 minutes or so of relaxation. Of course, we changed separately. I waited until after she got out to dress. Men could dress in a second flat. I’d be done in no time at all. And... I was gone.

“Let’s head back to our room.”

“Yeah,” Charlotte nodded.

She was blushing. I guess because she’d just gotten out of the bath? She was wearing her corset and passing as a boy again, but for some reason, her damp hair made my heart pound. After returning to our room, we passed the time with silly chatter until we fell asleep. I didn’t really remember it clearly, but we were tired, so that had to be what happened. Probably. Let’s just assume that.



The next day, Charlotte wasn’t in homeroom in the morning. She’d told me to go on ahead in the cafeteria, but something must have happened. Casting a look around the classroom, I noticed Laura wasn’t there as well. She must have still been recovering from the day before. Plus, the teachers probably wanted to debrief her further.

“Good morning, everyone...”

Ms. Yamada entered the classroom, noticeably unsteady. Something was really bugging her, for how early in the morning it was. Maybe she was worked up over her egg not being runny?

“Orimura, I can’t tell exactly what you’re thinking, but I

can tell you're thinking of me like a little kid. It makes me angry. Sigh..."

Angry, but still not angry enough to be forceful about it. Ah well. Sorry, Teach.

"Today, we have a new transfer student to introduce. Well, it's a transfer student, but they've already been introduced. Umm..."

I wasn't quite sure what Ms. Yamada meant, but... Huh? A transfer student? The rest of the class had the same reaction and set to murmuring back and forth. It was late enough in the year for transfer students and we'd already gotten two, so another? What in the world?

"Come in."

"Pardon me."

Eh? That voice sounded like—

"Charlotte Dunois. Pleased to meet you again."

Charlotte, in a skirt, gave a precise curtsy. Everyone in the class, including me, was so shocked that we could only return a polite nod.

"You see, Mr. Dunois is now Ms. Dunois. Aww, now I have to reassign dorm rooms..."

That must be what Ms. Yamada was so upset about. Wait a sec... As I tried to process the situation, the room exploded with a sea of questions.

"Eh? Dunois is a girl?"

"I thought something was wrong! So he's not a hunk, she's a babe?"

"Wait, Orimura, you shared a room! How could you miss that?"

"Hold it! Didn't they bathe together yesterday?!"

The tension in the classroom was palpable. It simmered for a few moments before boiling over.

Oh. This was bad. This definitely couldn't end well.

Smash! The classroom door flew open as if it were kicked down.

"ICHIKA!"

Huang Lingyin made her appearance, Her face flame-red with rage. It was as if a dragon was behind her. So this was what they meant when they talked about China's 4,000 years of history!

"DIE!"

At the same time as her IS took form, the impact cannons on each shoulder fired at full power.

Well, goodbye world. I'd be on the front page of tomorrow's papers: "Unfortunate high school boy killed by classmate. Corpse left unrecognizable. Classmates grieve." 'Mincemeat,' 'ketchup,' 'like fallen persimmons under a tree,' 'or maybe figs,' 'like an exploded can of soda,' 'probably Pepsi.'

—*Hey, wait, that last one's going to—*

Washoom!

"Hah, hah, hah...!"

Rin was so angry that her chest heaved with every breath. She was like a cat with its hair on end.

—*Wait, huh? I'm... Alive? I'm still alive?*

"....."

I didn't know how she managed that hair's-breadth save, but somehow, sandwiched between myself and Rin... Was Laura, in her jet-black IS Schwarzer Regen. Its AIC had completely absorbed the impact cannon's blast. Actually, now that I looked, she didn't even have her rail cannon.

"Thanks, you saved me. Wait... Your IS is already fixed? That's amazing."

"The core barely made it through unscratched. I assembled the rest from spare parts."

"Wow, real!— Wah!"

Suddenly. Out of nowhere. Laura grabbed me by the collar, pulled me in—and stole a kiss.



.....

“.....Ngh?!?!”

I was absolutely blindsided. I wished someone would explain to me what was going on. Rin, and the rest of the class, were agape. Everyone was. Even me.

“I will make you my bride! Es ist entscheiden! No objections!”

“B-Bride? Not ‘groom,’ maybe?”

I was so confused that I couldn’t do anything but answer calmly. Maybe I really was important— Nah, too much self-flattery.

“I’d heard Japan has a custom of—when taken with a fancy for someone—declaring you’d make them your bride. So I will make you my bride.”

Who told her something like that? C’mon, come clean.

“A-A-Ah...”

Rin’s mouth flapped, and wordless noises emanated. She was gulping like a goldfish. Yet somehow, I couldn’t shake my feeling of danger. I’d be screwed if she evolved right now.

“You—”

Clang! The impact cannons opened again.

“W-Wait! It’s not my fault! I’m the victim here!”

“Of course it’s your fault! All of it! Every single part! It’s your fault!”

What was that supposed to mean? How did she decide on that?! Anyway, my life was in danger. My only hope was to escape through the classroom’s door.

Fshiiing! A laser flashed in front of my nose. In terror, I turned towards its source.

“Going somewhere, Ichika? But there’s something I absolutely must discuss with you. I know it’s sudden, but this is deathly important. Ohohoho...”

Gulp. One, two, three, four... A total of five veins pulsing in anger, Cecilia blocked my path. In her hands was the Starlight Mk.III. The bits mounted on her back were already glowing. Only after did her armor phase in.

No way, no way, no way! Giving up on the stairs, I turned toward the window. This was only the second floor, I could survive the fall. If worse came to worst, I could deploy Byakushiki and—

Slam!

Something or other was there. I would have preferred something else, but I got other than what I wanted. A katana suddenly thrust in front of me.

—Eh? Is this the Sengoku period? A new spinoff, Sengoku IS Academy? I guess that'd work. Chacha's IS would probably be way overpowered, though. I dunno.

"Explain yourself... Ichika."

"Wait, wait, wait! I'm the one who wants an explana—
Whoa!"

A sharp blade slashed in my direction, as if to say "I'm not listening."

—You idiot! Are you trying to kill me?! Knock it off!

Enough already! I'd end up dead at this rate! I dove to the floor, and began an aimless struggle for escape. My mind was moving so fast that I had no sense of what was truly happening anymore.

Ker-chunk.

"Huh?"

I had bumped into something—someone. Half-reflexively, I looked up.

"....."

It was Charlotte, with a grin across her face. It was that angelic smile. Like Buddha smiling, even in Hell. It was infectious. I smiled back. With quite a bit of self-confidence, I might add.

"You'd kiss someone in front of other girls? I'm surprised."

"Er, Charlotte? I didn't kiss someone, I was kissed, and why do you have your IS out?"

"Hmmm, I wonder."

Rapid Switch wasn't even necessary... Charlotte called no weapon into her hand. Her strongest weapon was already

there, with her armor. She needed no other.

Bang!

The sound of gunpowder exploding filled the room as she purged the armor from her shield. Within was the .69-caliber Gray Scale Pile Bunker—also known as Shield Pierce.

“Ah, haha. Ahahaha...”

When people were pushed beyond their limits, all they could do was laugh. Wasn't there a song about that? I guess that was what it meant.

Wrrrraaaaanng!

Homeroom that day was rocked with the roar of explosions.

Epilogue: From a Deep-Red Doze

“Hmm...”

A strange room, packed with machinery in every corner, with cables rising up like an electric forest. Among their steel roots, a mechanical squirrel skittered, grasping fallen bolts like acorns. A rattle, like that of an old mechanical hard drive, echoed. Nowhere else in the world could a squirrel be found who could identify unnecessary parts, grasp their function, and rebuild them into a new form. Yes, this was Shinonono Tabane’s secret laboratory.

“Oh? Oh.”

Clatter...

Rattle, rattle.

“Oh...”

Shinonono Tabane struck an uncanny figure. She wore a one-piece dress as blue as the sky, like Alice in Alice in Wonderland. The large ribbon which held her apron drew the eye. Her face was unmistakably that of Houki’s older sister. But with their time apart, while Houki had acquired the stern gaze of a kendo master, Tabane’s sleeplessness had given hers an unhealthy squint. The bags under her eyes had endured for years.

This was the meaning of the saying “geniuses are slaves to their thoughts.” Her contemplation continued even in her sleep, robbing her of any chance for a quiet rest. At some point in her life, she may have had a good night’s sleep, but if she had, it was too long ago to remember. Unlike her sister, she had avoided kendo, or indeed any other sport, but her body was still lithe and curvy. And most noticeable were

her plump breasts.

Perhaps her shirt was too small, as her buttons strained, letting seductive peeks of her skin through gaps in its placket. And on her head... Well, if we were looking for problematic things, that was probably the one. For whatever reason, her headband had white bunny ears attached. She was like a walking, condensed Alice in Wonderland. Alice and the White Rabbit in one mismatched outfit.

But that was her thing, that was what she wanted to wear. Last month was Hansel and Gretel. It shouldn't need to be mentioned that no one could figure that out. This Tabane, then, leaned back in her strange chair. If one could call it that—but for lack of anything better to call it, that's what we've chosen. Glints of silver light reflected from it. Its twisted lines wrapped around Tabane like a cage. Almost as if it were the skeleton of a dinosaur. And as Tabane's fingers began to dance, the threads leading from them sparked a marionette to motion.

Clatter...

Rattle, rattle.

With the slightest of motion, the parts of the chair moved like a living thing, picking up a tiny tool. With it, they began working on a small part held in a pair of pincers. It was a smaller chair, holding yet smaller parts. Dozens of repetitions later, the chain reached its end. A plastic IS model on nano-scale. An absolute, unparalleled waste. An absolutely foolish, unforgivable timekiller.

"Ahh, finally done."

It was finished. Absolutely perfect, down to the paint and finish. She sighed in boredom as she rose from her chair. Tabane pressed a point on the seemingly-solid chair, and it collapsed into a pile of rubble.

"So, so bored."

Da-dum-da-da-dadum-da-da-da-da-dadah~♪ The sound of the theme to The Godfather filled the room. Even in the 21st century, there was no better theme for a

delinquent. Yet surely, not even its composer could imagine it being so loved in the far, far east. Somehow, she wanted to know whether he'd be elated or disgusted.

"Wait, this ringtone—!"

She leapt to her feet and dove for her phone. Her toolkit clattered into her painting mug, but Tabane didn't care. She pressed the phone to her ear.

"Hewwo? Hewwo yewwow?"

"....."

Click.

The person on the other end of the line obviously had hangups about that. At least, they'd hung up.

"Wait, wait!"

As if a god was answering Tabane's prayers, the phone rang again. **Da-dum-da-da-dadum-da-da-da-da-dadah~♪**

"It's everyone's idol, Shinonono Tabane— Wait, wait, wait! Chichan!"

"Don't call me that."

"Okay, Chichan!"

"Sigh. Whatever. I have a question for you."

"What is it?"

"Were you involved in this?"

"This... this what?"

Tabane shook her head. It was no evasion. She actually didn't know.

"The VT System."

"Oh. Really? Tee-hee. Do you really think I'd turn out a clunker like that? I'm the absolutely perfect Shinonono Tabane. Meaning, everything I make is absolutely perfect, too."

"....."

"And, now that you remind me, around two hours ago I made sure that the lab which did come up with it was wiped from the face of the earth. No casualties, of course. It was easier than taking candy from a baby. Chichan—have you

ever tried actually taking candy from a baby? It's pretty tough. You haven't? Huh." With a laugh, Tabane carefully cut herself off.

"That's good. Sorry to bother you."

"Oh, no problem! I wasn't busy at all! I'm open for you 24 hours, like a convenience store but better! Just dial 1-800-STABANE!"

"Talk to you later..."

The connection dropped with a loud click. This time, there would be no second try. For a moment, Tabane stared at her phone in regret, but a bare two seconds later she tossed it away.

"I'm glad to hear from you after so long! You're always so badass. Don't go chasing the setting sun away from me~" Tabane crossed her arms with a chuckle.

Orimura Chifuyu and Shinonono Tabane. They had first met in elementary school. After that, they had always been in the same class at the same school. Tabane had pulled every string she could to make it happen, and Chifuyu knew, but that wasn't their only connection.

When Chifuyu was in high school, the IS was revealed to the world, and for several years after she acted as its test pilot. Meaning, Chifuyu was leaps ahead of other pilots in terms of knowledge, and her understanding was on an entirely different level. She'd developed her own practice regimen and unique tactics. It was no surprise that she shone as the champion of the first Mondo Grosso tournament. If anything, it was only natural. Or so Tabane thought.

"I wonder why Chichan pulled out, though?"

She still didn't know. In terms of age or ability, Chifuyu was still a top-tier talent. She'd be an easy favorite in the next Mondo Grosso. But the heart was not so simple. Even a genius couldn't fully comprehend its depths—which was exactly why she wanted to. Because Tabane was interested in only three people in the world.

Ring. Ring.

Huweee~huwooo~huweee~huwooo~♪ Those of you lucky enough to still have their lives, take them with you! Her cell phone suddenly rang, with an astounding tone.

There may be a million fans of Kill Bill across Japan, but only Tabane would use that as a ringtone for her actual sister, even going so far as to include actual dialog from the film. Well, the million part was just a rough estimate. Don't try to do serious math with it. And really, Tabane herself wasn't a fan—but, she reacted even more strongly than when Chifuyu called. Her bunny ears perked straight up, which said more than any words could. After all, this was the first time that ringtone had ever rung. She knew who it was immediately.

“Hey, hey, hey! It's been so long! I've been waiting for you to call!”

“Tabane....”

“Yeah. I know just what you need. You want it, don't you? Your own, personal, IS. I've got it ready. It's a high-end machine, tweaked far beyond the standard. It can keep up with every move of that white one. Its name is Akatsubaki—”

End of Volume Two.

Afterword: Volume Two, a retrospective.

Hizu, hizu. It's Yumizuru! (Let's try to make that stick.)

Um, just like I wrote about at the end of the first volume, Rin, who was planned for volume two got moved to one. Then, volume two was supposed to be all about Laura. Somehow I lost focus on that, and the cross-dressing girl I'd planned for later—who I hadn't even yet named—transferred in at the same time, even moving in with Ichika. By two weeks after I'd submitted the manuscript for first volume, I had the details of the plot nailed down. I just kinda completely got into the zone with Charles this volume. I don't even understand it. It was just that feeling you get when you go "Eureka!"


So while I'd wanted from the beginning to make Laura the main character of this volume (including her moving in with Ichika,) when I came up the part where Ichika walked in on the crossdressing girl in the shower, I just **could not** resist!!!!!! And that's how Charles became his roommate instead. Speaking of which, just like Ms. Yamada was a character I hadn't planned on last volume, this time there's Ran. I suppose I'll keep coming up with them. Really, though. Ms. Yamada is a good character. Yeah. I'm satisfied with her. Especially with her chest.

Now that I think of it, the hardest part of writing IS is naming the characters. Looking through dictionaries, trying to pick something out... Rin, especially, was tough. (Chinese is difficult.) She may be the character I wrote the most naturally. Though you could rephrase that as her being the character I took the most care with. Hmm, was it around

then? Maybe a little later, when the anime was announced. I'm pretty sure I'd remember it being between the second and third volumes. I was hospitalized at the time.

But still: An anime! It was getting made into an anime! I was overjoyed. And it got better: I said "Wouldn't it be great if some of the guys who did Macross Frontier worked on it," and it ended up happening! I was shocked. After that, I said I liked a guy from "I My Me! Strawberry Eggs," and they got him too! I kept falling asleep at night wondering whether it was all a dream, or some kind of VR.

Anyway, that's about how it went! See you next time!
Byzu, byzu!

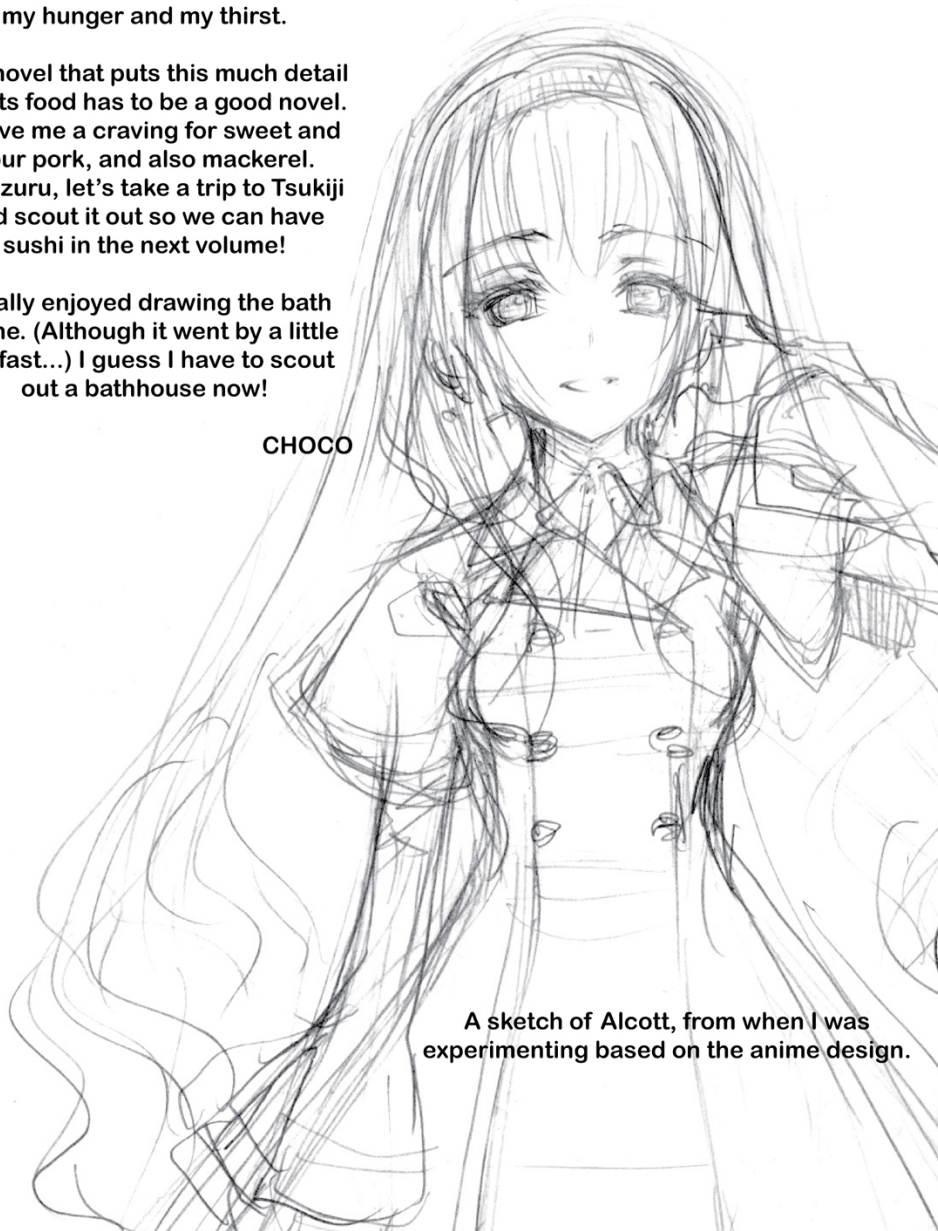
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Rough <input type="checkbox"/> Cleanup <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Afterword | Time : When the sparrows are chirping. |
|  CHOCO MUGITANI KOICHI | chocolateshop@mac.com http://chocolateshop-float.com |

IS, a tale which arouses
my hunger and my thirst.

Any novel that puts this much detail
into its food has to be a good novel.
It gave me a craving for sweet and
sour pork, and also mackerel.
Yumizuru, let's take a trip to Tsukiji
and scout it out so we can have
sushi in the next volume!

I really enjoyed drawing the bath
scene. (Although it went by a little
too fast...) I guess I have to scout
out a bathhouse now!

CHOCO



A sketch of Alcott, from when I was
experimenting based on the anime design.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Chapter I: Boy Meets Boy](#)

[Chapter II: My Roommate is a Blond Gentleman](#)

[Chapter III: Blue Days/Red Switch](#)

[Chapter IV: Find Out My Mind](#)

[Epilogue: From a Deep-Red Doze](#)

[Afterword](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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by Izuru Yumizuru

Translated by Mike Langwiser
Edited by Meiru

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